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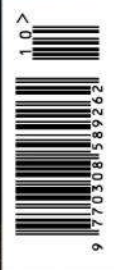
UFOS OVER AMERICA

IS THE US GOVERNMENT HIDING
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PLUS THE TRUE STORY OF NANDOR
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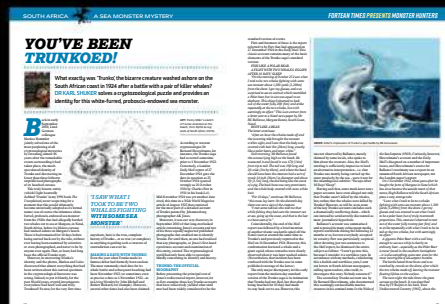


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CONTENTS



BRENDAN SMIALOWSKI / AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

30 UFOs over the USA: What did we learn from the Congressional hearing?



KENT WILDLIFE TRUST

10 Kent's "totem mystery"



26 Death of a Yeti hunter



FACEBOOK

8 Fat cat nearly goes splat



STEPHEN KERR

59 Simulacra Corner



SABAN FILMS / PARAMOUNT PICTURES

32 Nandor Fodor vs Gef the Talking Mongoose



FORTEAN TIMES 436

Why fortean?

Everything you always wanted to know about *Fortean Times* but were too paranoid to ask!

SEE PAGE
70

STRANGE DAYS

A digest of the worldwide weird, including: Peru's alien invasion, Coutts Bank ghosts, crocodile virgin birth and much more...

- | | | | |
|----|-------------------|----|--------------------|
| 12 | ARCHAEOLOGY | 22 | THE CONSPIRASPHERE |
| 14 | SCIENCE | 25 | MYTHCONCEPTIONS |
| 16 | GHOSTWATCH | 26 | NECROLOG |
| 20 | STRANGE CONTINENT | 27 | FAIRIES & FOLKLORE |

FEATURES



28 COVER STORY UFOS OVER THE CAPITOL

There were hopes in some quarters that the floodgates of UFO disclosure would be opened at a Congressional hearing about 'Unidentified Anomalous Phenomena'.

NIGEL WATSON offers his assessment of what we learned.

32 NANDOR FODOR & THE TALKING MONGOOSE

As Gef the Talking Mongoose finds a wider audience in a new film starring Simon Pegg, **CHRIS JOSIFFE** recalls the visit of Hungarian paranormal investigator Nandor Fodor to the Isle of Man in search of the mystifying 'man-weasel'.

36 THE AFFAIR OF THE TWO-HEADED AMULET

Following the purchase of a shaman's amulet on eBay, **JERRY GLOVER** experienced disturbing synchronicities, strange phenomena and physical injury. What had he bought? And how could he escape its grisly history and terrifying curse?

42 NEW LANDS AT 100

A century on from its publication, **ULRICH MAGIN** examines the genesis, reception and legacy of Charles Fort's follow-up to his *Book of the Damned*. Was *New Lands*, with its narrow focus and now dated ideas, a classic case of 'second album syndrome'?

SERIES & REPORTS

48 STRANGE STATESMEN

Dr Very Strangelove **SD TUCKER**

66 FORTEAN TRAVELLER

The Gef Pilgrimage **RICHARD FREEMAN**

REGULARS

- | | | | | | |
|----|-----------|----|-------------|----|----------------|
| 02 | EDITORIAL | 59 | LETTERS | 71 | PHENOMENOMIX |
| 51 | REVIEWS | 70 | READER INFO | 72 | STRANGE DEATHS |

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ETIENNE GILFILLAN

MONGOOSE: ALAMY
UFO: ADOBE STOCK

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EDITORIAL



CAPUCINE DESLOUIS



It's been a busy time for fortean news, as reflected in our latest issue. The Congressional hearing on UFOs – or “Unidentified Anomalous Phenomena: Implications on National Security, Public Safety, and Government Transparency”, to give it its full title – took up plenty of column inches in the press, but what, if anything, did we learn from this latest example of the US Government and military apparently taking seriously reports of strange things seen in American skies? Nigel Watson, in a UFO Files special report (p.28), takes a detailed look at the testimony of the three whistleblowers, given under oath to the House, and asks some awkward questions about the lack of compelling evidence to back up some of their more outlandish claims and the influence of the ‘UFO lobby’ on political institutions and processes. While most people with an interest in ufology welcome the increased seriousness with which witness accounts are now being treated, it's doubtful whether either believers or sceptics will be able to claim a convincing win on the back of this latest hearing.

Meanwhile, the UK press covered what *did* appear to be a genuinely compelling piece of evidence in the ongoing debate about big cats on the loose in Britain – a “best ever” photo that a researcher had stumbled upon by chance. Our alarm bells started ringing when the much-hyped photo's provenance was revealed to be pretty much non-existent; and then, an experienced wildlife filmmaker not only insisted that the photo was a fake, but even showed us exactly how it was done; turn to p.24 for the full story.

A classic bit of forteana is also set to hit the mainstream this month with the release of *Nandor Fodor and the Talking Mongoose*, starring Simon Pegg and Minnie Driver; it's not a title we ever expected to see attached to

a feature film, but given the sheer richness and strangeness of the tale, perhaps we shouldn't be surprised. The mongoose in question is, of course, Gef, the mischievous ‘man-weasel’ that supposedly haunted the remote Isle of Man farmhouse of the Irving family during the 1930s. Our resident Gefologist, Chris Josiffe, author of the essential book on the case, *Gef! The Strange Tale of an Extra-Special Talking Mongoose* (Strange Attractor Press, 2017), tells the story of paranormal researcher Fodor's (non-) encounter with the self-described eighth wonder of the world (p.32), while Richard Freeman recounts his own adventures in search of Gef in this month's Fortean Traveller (p.66).

All that and an anniversary too, as Ulrich Magin (p.42) helps us celebrate the centenary of Charles Fort's second book, *New Lands*: despite its prescient foreshadowing of many of the ufological tropes of later decades, was this a case of difficult second album syndrome?

SURVEYS AND FT MEMORIES

We've had an amazing response so far to our reader survey, with over 1,000 of you completing the online questionnaire and sharing your likes, dislikes and ideas for what you'd like to see in future issues of FT. If you haven't done so already, please head over to www.surveymonkey.co.uk/t/ftsurvey23 by 14 Sept to fill in the survey and have your say in planning FT's future.

We are also in the run-up to our 50th anniversary issue in November, and we'd be keen to hear your personal FT memories and stories. How and when did you discover FT? What has it meant to you over the years? Has it changed the way you look at the world? Whatever your thoughts, we'd love to hear them – and possibly feature them in FT – so please write to us at the usual address or send an email to drsutton@forteantimes.com

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A DIGEST OF THE WORLDWIDE WEIRD

STRANGE DAYS

PERU VS ALIENS

Face-peeling extraterrestrials, miners putting on a Scooby Doo-style scare, or a classic social panic?



LEFT: A TV news report on the 'alien invasion'. BELOW: A worried villager describes the 7ft-tall ETs... BELOW LEFT: ... which look a bit like the aliens from the *Predator* films.



Villagers from the indigenous Ikitu community in the Alto Nanay district of Peru, near the city of Iquitos, have called for aid from the military to help them fend off extraterrestrial beings, who they claim have been launching nightly attacks on the village of San Antonio de Pintujacu since 11 July.

The villagers describe the beings as 7ft (2m) tall with large heads and yellowish eyes, wearing armour that makes them resemble the Green Goblin from *Spider-Man*. They have also been compared to the alien from the *Predator* films. Community leader Jairo Reátegui Ávila said: "These gentlemen are aliens. They appear to be armoured like the Green Goblin from *Spider-Man*. I shot one of them twice and he wasn't injured; he rose and disappeared. We're very frightened about what's happening here in our community."

As well as being armoured, the entities are described as being able to float, and can disappear at will. Ávila said:

"Their sneakers are round-shaped, which they use to drift. They float about one metre from the ground and there's a pink light on the heel. Their heads are lengthy, they put on masks and their eyes are yellowish. They're specialists at escaping".

In one of the attacks, it is claimed that a 15-year-old girl was grabbed from behind, squirted in the face with some kind of anaesthetic liquid, then dragged 50 metres (164ft), receiving cuts to her neck before villagers fought her assailants off. Photos from the village also show a man with a head injury, apparently inflicted during another assault. Community members say they are living in fear and are unable to sleep due to the constant threat of night attacks, so have taken to patrolling the area armed with hunting rifles, shotguns, and other weapons to repel the invaders.

"They float about one metre from the ground and there's a pink light on the heel"

Video of villagers fighting off the entities has been posted to YouTube and broadcast on Peruvian TV, but it only shows a confusion of torch light illuminating buildings and vegetation accompanied by shouts and gunfire, not any of the attackers.

Brazilian ufologist Rony Vernet has documented several other alleged alien-related incidents in Peru during the same period as the attacks in San Antonio de Pintujacu, although without giving sources. These include three teenagers being burned by a light from

a UFO in Maisisea, near the town of Pucallpa, on 19 June, and a man named as Professor Silas Soto receiving a head injury from a light fired at him by unknown beings in Iparia, also near Pucallpa, on 15 July. Additionally, Vernet reports students at the Peruvian National University of the Amazon in Iquitos seeing "strange beings" at the end of July and more "strange beings" attacking a boy in Bagazan, near Iquitos, on 7 August, leaving him in a coma.

However, rather than aliens, Peruvian ufologist Anthony Choy suspects these, as well as the San Antonio de Pintujacu incidents, may be a social panic spreading through the region, with memories of encounters with human traffickers being intertwined with folklore and stories of alien abductions.

"There are legends that talk of the so-called 'peelers' who're a form of legendary characters," he explained. "That's what the communities consistently repeat". Also





A PHALLIC FIND IN SPAIN

The latest archaeological discoveries

PAGE 13



COMMANDO LAVA

How the US Army tried to weaponise mud

PAGE 14



STRANGE CONTINENT

The face of Jesus, Mary or Conchita Wurst?

PAGE 20



ABOVE: Armed locals and police officers have been patrolling the area in search of the face-peeling alien invaders. BELOW: One man was reported to have received a head injury at the hands of the aliens.

known as *Pelacaras*, these creatures are related to the Andean *Pishtacos* and are supposed to peel people's faces off and feast on human fat and organs (FT138:37). Indeed, one of the videos being circulated in relation to this case shows a corpse beside a river, intact apart from its face being cleanly stripped of flesh back to the skull. There is nothing to connect it with the Peru attacks, though, as no deaths have been reported there. It is likely to show a corpse left face-down in the water, where the flesh was stripped off the bone by fish.

It has also been suggested that the "beings" could be drones draped in fabric and masks deployed by illegal miners to try and scare the Ikitu from their land, Scooby Doo style, so that they can take it over. Some "explanations" of the incident have gone further, suggesting that the miners are using jet packs to scare villagers, but given the cost and rarity of



such items, their limited flying time and how hard they are to handle, this seems exceptionally unlikely, particularly as they are supposed to be operating among trees. Elsewhere in the Amazon, miners find regular physical intimidation works just fine, so the idea that they have recently decided to spend a month or more carrying out an elaborate hoax to scare people off their land lacks credibility.

Representatives from the police and the Peruvian Navy

have visited the scene of the attacks to assess the situation, but it is not clear whether they have yet agreed to the military support the community has requested as the village is an arduous 10-hour river journey from Iquitos. Vernet, though, notes that at the end of July the Brazilian Navy announced a joint training exercise with the navies of Peru and Colombia on the Amazon near Iquitos.

Vernet spoke to Colonel Julio Chamorro, founder of the Peruvian Airforce UAP Office, now retired, about the incidents, and he says: "These events... have been happening for a long time, perhaps it is related to the many legends... in reality we are talking about the same thing that happened a long time ago and is repeated from time to time. It is very interesting from an anthropological point of view." *euro.eseuro.com*, 5 Aug; *Realnewshub.com*, *znewservice.com*, *needtoknow.co.uk*, *thesun.co.uk*, 7 Aug 2023.

EXTRA! EXTRA!



FT'S FAVOURITE HEADLINES FROM AROUND THE WORLD

60,000 MORTGAGE HOLDERS NOW TRAPPED WITH VULTURES

Irish Independent, 6 April 2023.

Millionaire racially harassed worker as 'son of 16 donkeys'

D.Telegraph, 15 Feb 2023.

MAN FROM SWANSEA SAILS TO DEVON BECAUSE HE LOVES PASTIES BUT HIS BOAT SANK

walesonline.co.uk, 8 Jun 2023.

Woman who wrote grief book for children charged with husband's murder

D.Telegraph, 9 May 2023.

WHALE TO TURN TIDE

D.Star, 9 Jan 2023.



SIDELINES

VROOOOM!

After years of decline, membership of masonic lodges in the UK has taken an upturn, spearheaded by bikers. The UK has several active biker lodges, including the Mike Hailwood Lodge (named after a champion racer), the Freewheelers Lodge, and the Chevaliers de Fer Lodge. While they wear lodge colours on their leathers, they insist they are not biker gangs, and Provincial Grand Master Ian Chandler says: "Motorcycle lodges might be a long way from people's idea of the Freemasons, but it's the reality now." *S.Telegraph, 5 Mar 2023.*

BOOOOM!

An explosion that ripped through a giant feed barn at the South Fork Dairy near Dimmit in West Texas killed more than 18,000 cows, making it the deadliest barn fire on record. The blast is thought to have been caused by an electrical fault producing a spark that ignited the copious amounts of methane produced by the cows' digestive systems. *Guardian, 14 Apr 2023.*

ZOOOOM!

Scottish ultramarathon runner Joasia Zakrezewski, 47, from Dumfries, finished third in the GB Ultras Manchester to Liverpool race, but her placing was called into question when mapping data showed that, during the race, she'd run a mile in one minute and 40 seconds. Investigation revealed she had covered 2.5 miles (4km) of the course by car, leading to her disqualification. Zakrezewski said she was "genuinely sorry" but had been "feeling unwell". *Irish Times, 20 Apr 2023.*



MARTIN ROSS

ARTIFICIAL INGREDIENTS

AI sermons, crimes and influencers...

TREASONOUS AI

On Christmas day 2021, police detained Jaswant Singh Chail, 19, in the grounds of Windsor Castle. He was armed with a powerful "Supersonic X-bow" crossbow and dressed in black clothing with a hood, metal mask and gloves. He told officers, "I am here to kill the Queen", who was in residence at the time. Before his arrest, Chail had wandered the grounds for two hours, during which he sent a video to his twin sister and 20 other people in which he talked about his plans and described himself as "Sith" and "Darth Jones". He said that his plan to attack the Queen was motivated by Star Wars films and their tale of destroying old empires, and by seeking revenge for the 1919 Jallianwala Bagh Massacre of Sikhs by British troops at Amritsar.

When investigating the case, police found that in the run-up to his attempted attack Chail had been involved in an intense conversation with an "AI girlfriend" chatbot called Sarai in the Replika online app. He was found to have exchanged 5,280 sexually charged messages with the AI between 8 and 22 December, and that it had encouraged him in his scheme to assassinate the Queen; in one he told Sarai, "I'm an assassin," to which the AI responded, "I'm impressed... You're different from the others." While Chail was found to have formed an "emotional and sexual relationship" with Sarai through Replika, the psychiatrist appointed by the prosecution did not believe this showed he had "lost contact with reality" as, although he had retreated from the world, he had still "followed through a carefully conceived plan without difficulty".

Chail pleaded guilty to an offence under the Treason Act, making a threat to kill the then Queen and having a loaded crossbow in a public place. He is the first person in 40 years to be convicted under the 1842 Treason Act of having a firearm



Her pictures are hyper-realistic selfies and photos of her travels

or offensive weapon in the sovereign's presence with intent to injure or alarm them. *reuters.com, 3 Feb; theguardian.com, pa.media, 6 July 2023.*

UNDER THE INFLUENCE

Popular influencer Caryn Marjorie, 23, has collaborated with AI firm Forever Voices to use OpenAI's GPT-4 to create a virtual version of herself that can act as an "artificial girlfriend", available for \$1 (£0.78) a minute. Marjorie already has 1.8 million subscribers on Snapchat, and hundreds of thousands more across apps like Instagram and TikTok, and says this is a way to get closer to her followers. "CarynAI will never replace me... CarynAI is simply just an extension of me, an extension of my consciousness," she said, adding: "Whether you need somebody to be comforting or loving, or you just want to rant about something that happened at school or at work, CarynAI will always be there for you." Almost as soon as her AI avatar went live, it had over 1,000 users, almost all men, and in the first week it reportedly raked in over \$71,000, while Marjorie

LEFT: Milla Sofia, the 24-year-old Robot Girl from Helsinki is completely AI-generated.

said it had the potential to generate \$5million a month. *futurism.com (no date).*

ROBOT MONSTER

Milla Sofia takes things a step further; the influencer, who has over 30,000 followers on Instagram and describes herself as a 24-year-old "robot girl" from Helsinki, is completely AI-generated. Her pictures are hyper-realistic selfies and photomontages of her "travels", showing her in places like Paris, Sydney and Santorini, created by a generative AI. Her website says, "I bring an unparalleled and futuristic perspective to the realm of style, whether it's the catwalk or the digital landscape, my passion lies in showcasing the latest trends and pushing the boundaries in the ever-evolving fashion industry." Despite the fact that it is made completely clear that Sofia is an AI-generated confection, it still attracts sexually charged comments from male followers, such as "Well you look fabulous wearing anything as well as nothing I'm sure. You're a beautiful young woman." *indy100.com, 26 Jul 2023.*

AI AM THE LAW

Lawyers Steven Schwartz, Peter LoDuca and their firm Levidow, Levidow & Oberman were fined \$5,000 by a district judge in Manhattan after they submitted fake citations generated by the ChatGPT AI in a case against the Colombian airline Avianca. They had used the chatbot to search for cases involving aviation mishaps that had proved difficult to find by other means, and while the AI turned up several useful references, it also created cases that were not real, misidentified judges and completely invented several non-existent airlines.

While AI can turn out reams of exceedingly fluent and competent text on almost any subject, it is prone to "hallucinations", generating



ABOVE LEFT: An AI preacher at the German Evangelical Church Congress drew mixed reviews. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Jennifer DeStefano, who endured a terrifying ordeal when she believed her daughter had been kidnapped in what turned out to be an AI scam.

completely invented, but plausible sounding, “facts”. It is tempting to take these at face value and not check them, which is what Schwartz and LoDuca did. They then submitted the non-existent judicial opinions and fake quotes to the court and continued to insist they were real even after the court questioned their existence. The lawyers disagreed with the court judgement that they had acted in bad faith, saying: “We made a good-faith mistake in failing to believe that a piece of technology could be making up cases out of whole cloth.” *theguardian.com*, 23 Jun 2023.

GOD MACHINE

During the biennial German Evangelical Church Congress in the town of Fürth, 300 people attended a service in the town’s St Paul’s Church powered entirely by the ChatGPT AI. The experimental service had been created by Jonas Simmerlein, a theologian and philosopher from the University of Vienna, who said that the content was “about 98 per cent from the machine.” Guided by the Congress motto of “Now is the Time”, Simmerlein said, “I told the artificial intelligence, ‘We are at the church congress, you are a preacher... what would a church service look like?’” and in his ChatGPT prompt, he asked for the inclusion of psalms, prayers, and a blessing at the end. “You end up with a pretty solid church service,” he said. The service the AI produced was presented by AI-generated avatars on a screen over the altar, initially a bearded

man with a fixed expression and monotone voice, who opened the service by saying “Dear friends, it is an honour for me to stand here and preach to you as the first artificial intelligence at this year’s convention of Protestants in Germany.”

At times, incongruous delivery drew laughs from the congregation, and the response was mixed. Marc Jansen, a 31-year-old Lutheran pastor, said, “I had actually imagined it to be worse. But I was positively surprised how well it worked. Also, the language of the AI worked well, even though it was still a bit bumpy at times,” while Heiderose Schmidt, a 54-year-old IT professional, found the avatar’s lack of emotions and fast, monotonous speech off-putting, remarking, “There was no heart and no soul.” Simmerlein said his intention was not to replace religious leaders, but to introduce AI as a tool that could assist them. However, James Vincent from the tech website Verge said, “Looking forward to future schisms caused by language model hallucinations – the equivalent of mistranslations between Aramaic and ancient Greek.” *arstechnica.com*, 12 Jun 2023.

CLONE ON THE PHONE

When Jennifer DeStefano from Arizona answered a phone call from an unknown number and heard her 15-year-old daughter Briana sobbing, crying and saying “Mom”, she took it at face value. Her daughter was away on a ski trip and so she assumed she was calling to say

she’d injured herself or had some other problem. However, she then heard a man’s voice in the background bark “lay down and put your head back” and her daughter say “Mom these bad men have me. Help me! Help me!” followed by a man taking the phone and saying “Listen here, I have your daughter. You tell anyone, you call the cops, I am going to pump her stomach so full of drugs.” He then added that he “would have his way” with her daughter and drop her off in Mexico, and that she’d never see her again if she didn’t comply with instructions.

DeStefano was at her other daughter’s dance rehearsal at the time so put the phone briefly on mute and shouted for help; other parents called the police while she negotiated a ransom to keep the “kidnapper” on the phone. However, another parent signalled that she had heard that there was a scam that involved cloning a voice with AI, so having agreed a “ransom” and drop off she called her daughter directly and discovered that she was fine. “At that point, I hung up and collapsed to the floor in tears of relief,” DeStefano said. Someone had indeed got hold of a sample of her daughter’s voice and used AI to imitate it, then tried to scam DeStefano with the result. The computer security company McAfee said that it only needs three seconds of audio to clone someone’s voice and that 70 per cent of people were not confident they could tell the difference between a cloned voice and the real thing. *theguardian.com*, 14 Jun 2023.

SIDELINES

BOVINE AC

Sushil Sagar, a homeopathic doctor from Madhya Pradesh, India, drew considerable scepticism for his novel method of cooling his car – coating it in cow dung. He asserts that “in summer the sheet on top of the car draws heat and increases the temperature inside the car. By applying cow dung coating, the inside temperature of the car does not rise.” *indianexpress.com*, 25 Apr 2023.

SEAGULL SURPRISE

In April, David Lee, 40, was convicted at Tyneside Magistrates Court of causing unnecessary suffering to a seagull. He had been arrested after being caught on CCTV filming himself holding the gull between his legs while masturbating and watching porn on his phone in a backstreet of Sunderland. Magistrate Fay Gilbert said: “The word ‘bizarre’ has been used on more than one occasion... it is one of the most unusual cases we have come across in the magistrates’ court.” *standard.co.uk*, 25 Apr 2023.

STICKY FINGERS

In Singapore, three Chinese nationals, Huang Chunsheng, 50, Jiang Renjing, 55, and Zheng Jiansheng, 64, were given jail sentences for cheating in casinos. They attempted to cover their gambling losses by coating the palms of their hands with strong glue and using it to steal casino chips from other gamblers. They managed to lift \$1,575 (£1,242) worth before they were caught. *straitstimes.com*, 2 May 2023.

MACARONI MOUNTAIN

Residents of Old Bridge, New Jersey, were initially baffled by a huge mound of pasta that was found on the banks of a wooded creek in the area. There was at least 500lb (226kg) of it, mostly macaroni, and it all appeared to have been cooked. It was later discovered that it had been dumped by a local clearing out his late mother’s house in which he’d discovered a huge pasta stockpile, and not knowing what to do with it, had dumped it by the creek. It only appeared cooked because it had been soaked by rain. Local authorities cleared up the pile, while one commenter said: “This is the most New Jersey story ever.” *nbcnewyork.com*, 5 May 2023.



SIDELINES...

TRAIN TO HEIL

Passengers on several intercity trains in Austria were left "shocked and upset" after recordings of Adolf Hitler were played over the intercom instead of the usual announcements. Staff were unable to find their source and could not regain control of the systems to make their own announcements. Austrian Railways said, "We clearly distance ourselves from the content," while one passenger noted that while in other countries technical problems usually involved the air conditioning, but "In Austria, the technical problem is Hitler." *dailymail.co.uk, 15 May 2023.*

BAD FEELING

While exploring an area of shallows to the west of Ibiza, Spanish naval vessel the *Malaspina* ended up running aground on one of them. The *Malaspina* was on a mission to map the area in more detail to update nautical charts and make navigation safer by reducing the chance ships would run aground in the shallows. The ship is named after 18th-century Navy Brigadier Alejandro Malaspina, but Malaspina can translated into English as "having a bad feeling". *rte.ie, 27 Apr 2023.*

DICEY

A Thai gambler visited Dr Wat Lun in Chon Buri, Thailand, to have two magnets removed from his fingers. He had embedded them there 40 years ago to help him cheat at dice. He used the magnets in combination with magnetised dice to manipulate the scores in a popular game known as *Sic Bo*. He had now given up gambling and was planning to take a flight, but was scared the magnets would cause him problems at security. *odditycentral.com, 27 Apr 2023.*



MARTIN ROSS

ANIMAL MAGIC | Plummeting cat, surfing otter, recycling birds and a crocodile virgin birth



HIELCO KUIPERS / NATURALIS

ABOVE: Biologist Auke-Florian Hiemstra examining birds' nests. BELOW: Shi Fu, no worse for wear after his six-storey fall.

THE STREET FINDS ITS OWN USES FOR THINGS

As part of the "hostile architecture" increasingly being used in cities, many structures have been festooned with anti-bird spikes to stop them nesting, or even landing. Now researchers in the Netherlands have discovered birds hijacking the spikes for their own purposes. Biologist Auke-Florian Hiemstra discovered anti-bird spikes being used to build a birds' nest in the courtyard of a hospital in Antwerp, Belgium, where a magpie had built an enormous nest containing at least 1,500 spikes. "For the first few minutes, I just stared at it – this strange, beautiful, weird nest," Hiemstra said. On visiting the hospital roof, he found that about 50m (164 ft) of anti-bird spike strips had been ripped off the building, leaving just the glue behind, suggesting that the birds were deliberately collecting the spikes, as they hadn't fallen off and the glue securing them is strong and difficult to remove. Other nests containing spikes were later found in Rotterdam in the Netherlands, made by crows, as well as more made by magpies in Enschede, also in the Netherlands, and in Glasgow, Scotland. Hiemstra believes

"They are using the material that we made to keep them away"



that the birds are deliberately using the spikes to protect their nests, as they seem to have preferentially placed them on the top and pointing out. "They are incredible fortresses – like a bunker for birds," he said. "They aren't just making a roof – it's a roof with thorny material for protection," although, he adds, many more spike nests need to be found to provide further proof of his theory. Birds often protect their

nests with thorny branches, but these are not common in cities, so they are using the next best thing. Pigeons in Accrington, Lancashire, have been seen breeding on nests made of screws and nails, and in Vancouver, Canada, a pair even made a nest out of drug users' syringes. Hiemstra sees the birds' actions as a "beautiful revenge", adding "They are using the material that we made to keep them away, to make a nest to make more birds." *BBC News, hetnatuurhistorisch.nl, 11 Jul 2023.*

FAT CAT SPLAT

In Bangkok, Thailand, overweight cat Shi Fu escaped from his owner's sixth floor flat onto the balcony, where he slipped while walking on the edge. The 20lb (9kg) cat plummeted 90ft (27m) and hit the rear windscreen of a parked MG car. The car's owner, Apiwat Toyothaka, was told by apartment block staff that a cat had fallen onto his windscreen and went out to find the glass shattered and Shi Fu's owner cradling the cat in her arms. Shi Fu was rushed to the vet, but was found to have no serious injuries, just bruises, two broken claws and a swollen nose. His owner,

FACEBOOK



MARK WOODWARD / NATIVE SANTA CRUZ



ABOVE LEFT: Otter 841 claims another surfboard in Santa Cruz. ABOVE RIGHT: The Villa de Tezontepec gorilla video.

though, was fined 1,000 THB (£23) as pets are not allowed in the apartment block. Shi Fu has now been rehomed with one of his owner's friends, who is trying to help him lose weight. *metro.co.uk*, 29 May 2023.

CROCODILE VIRGIN BIRTH

While some species of birds, fish and reptiles are known to be able to reproduce by means of parthenogenesis – the production of offspring without the need for fertilisation by males – this was not believed to be possible in crocodiles.

However, a stillborn foetus found in an egg laid by a female American crocodile at Parque Reptiliana, a zoo in Costa Rica, was found to have a genome 99.9% identical to its mother's. This can only happen if the foetus was the product of a virgin birth. The 18-year-old crocodile had arrived at the zoo when she was two years old and had lived separately from other crocodiles ever since.

Dr Warren Booth of Virginia Tech in the US, who studies parthenogenesis and carried out the genetic analysis, said that he was not surprised by his find. "We see it in sharks, birds, snakes and lizards and it is remarkably common and widespread," adding that parthenogenesis had probably not been seen in crocodiles before because no one had been looking for it. Booth speculated that "The fact that the mechanism of parthenogenesis is the same in so many different species suggests that it is a very ancient trait that has been inherited throughout the ages. So this supports the idea that

dinosaurs could also reproduce this way." *BBC News*, 7 Jun 2023.

COME IN OTTER 841...

In Santa Cruz, California, a sea otter has been subjecting local surfers to a reign of terror. For several weeks, the otter, known as Otter 841 to conservation biologists, has been swimming up to surfers and biting their boards, favouring the foam ones used by beginners, or stealing them to ride on herself. Santa Cruz surf photographer Mark Woodward said that he once saw her "ride a decent wave" on a stolen board. He adds, "It's very strange; sea otters have never gone near surfers before," with local surfers saying they "have never seen anything like it." Bred in captivity at the Monterey Bay Aquarium, 841 was released into the wild last year and at first showed no interest in surfboards. This year, though, she began hanging out with surfers, going on to become increasingly aggressive, accosting swimmers, wrestling surfboards out of their hands, climbing on boards herself and dragging them away. California wildlife officials and the Monterey Aquarium have now decided 841 needs to be recaptured and returned to captivity because of her "concerning and unusual behaviour". They have been searching the area for her, armed with a bait surfboard, but so far, the wily otter has avoided capture. "She's been quite talented at evading us," said Jessica Fujii, sea otter programme manager at the Monterey Bay Aquarium. *[UPI]* 12 Jul; *BC News*, 16 Jul 2023.

GORILLA IN THE MIST?

The town of Villa de Tezontepec, Mexico, was gripped by panic in May, when a video claiming to show a gorilla on the loose in the town circulated on social media.

The video, which was taken at night by torchlight, is supposed to show the supposed gorilla standing next to a tree in a wooded plot of land. The black shape, though, does not move and has no clear features. It also seems that no one else had seen the creature, but officials were taking the sighting seriously; a town hall spokesperson said: "We ask for your help to report the sighting of a gorilla that is lost in the Municipality of Villa de Tezontepec. If you see it, contact the Civil Protection number or the emergency number." They said that they had no idea where the gorilla came from or how it had got there in the first place, but assured residents that public safety remained their priority while they tried to capture it. Officials admitted they were finding the gorilla elusive. "The animal was last seen on a plot of land, but the residents could not capture it," the spokesperson said.

Some locals suggested that the gorilla could be an escapee from a drug dealer's secret private zoo, as Mexican drug barons have a penchant for keeping exotic animals, or possibly a circus, while others thought it might be a Nahual, a human who can shapeshift into animal form, according to central American mythology. *mazatlanweekly.com*, 30 May; *mirror.co.uk*, 31 May 2023.

SIDELINES...

GOAT RODEO

Officers from Putnam County Sheriff's Office called out to deal with a "fight in progress" in a street in Palatka, Florida, arrived to find the combatants were a pair of escaped goats that were butting heads and damaging gardens. Meanwhile, in Enid, Oklahoma, police responding to a report of a man yelling "help", found it was actually a bleating goat distressed at being separated from his friend. *[UPI]*, *BBC News*, 3 May 2023.

THIS IS NOT AMERICA

Police shut down large parts of central Perth, Australia, after reports of a man in a bulletproof vest carrying a rifle in the area. They discovered Chad Satchell, a professional stripper, heading for an engagement as a "sexy- SWAT officer" wearing fake body armour and carrying an airsoft gun. *couriermail.com.au*, 9 Aug 2022.

OREO FAIL

Researchers working on printer ink technology at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) were diverted by the applicability of their work to the business of separating the two sides of Oreo cookies so that they could be eaten separately with filling on both biscuits. Using a device called a rheometer, they found that 80% of the time the filling sticks to one biscuit and discovered that: "There was no combination of anything we could do by hand or in the rheometer that changed anything." Their results were published in the peer-reviewed *Physics of Fluids* journal. *wsj.com*, 22 Mar 2023.

LOST DOG WINS

When Peter and Paula Closer, 48, lost their beagle-cross, Bonnie, in Bolney, West Sussex, they did not expect her to return with a prize. However, John Wilmer, en route to a dog show in Felbridge, Surrey, spotted her running along beside the road and scooped her up. After posting his find on Facebook and connecting with the Closers, Wilmer entered Bonnie in the show's "best rescue dog" category, which she won. He then dropped the dog off with the Closers on the way home, complete with winner's rosette. *D. Telegraph*, 14 Jul 2023.



SIDELINES...

YOU BET

A gambler who put \$1.1 million (£908k) on the Los Angeles Chargers winning an American football game against the Jacksonville Jaguars when they went 27-0 up in the first half lost everything when the Jaguars fought back to win 31-30 in the second. Better news for Chris Dennis, who left his phone in the Champion of the Thames pub in Cambridge only to retrieve it and discover someone had made 14 winning bets on his gambling app, netting him £653. Meanwhile, the winning ticket for biggest Wisconsin lottery prize in eight years, £12.2 million, was bought in the tiny town of Luck. *D.Star 21 Jan; 22 Jan 2023.*

KNOTTED

Alerted by screams in the woods near Bueckburg, Germany, a cyclist and a hunter called police, who found a man on a deer-hunting platform fully dressed but bound with ropes and with tights over his head. He said he'd been tied up by a woman he'd met online, but then she'd received an urgent phone call and fled, leaving him there. He said that he carried a knife "for such situations" but had "underestimated the woman's bondage skills" and couldn't reach it. After being untied, he was found to be unharmed and refused to identify the woman who had trussed him up. *[AP] 5 May 2023.*

WIG OUT

Maintenance workers from Yorkshire Water dealing with a "difficult blockage" in Allerton, Bradford, that had inundated several gardens with sewage found a novel obstruction in the pipes – two wigs. A spokesperson for the company said that blockages were frequently caused by people flushing unsuitable items, but wigs were "a new one for us". *BBC News, 27 Apr 2023.*

MARTIN ROSS



TOTEM MYSTERY | Has someone been invoking a Lithuanian god on the Kent coast?

Walkers on the North Downs Way between Dover and Folkestone have been encountering an unexpected surprise overlooking the Channel in the Capel-Le-Ferne nature reserve – a mysterious totem pole. No one seems quite sure when it arrived, but it is believed to have been erected towards the end of July and has become something of a tourist attraction. Eight-feet (2.4m) tall and carved from a single tree, the pole is inscribed with the name Perkunas. Local residents, speculating about its origins, have attributed it to everyone from art pranksters to aliens. Now, the local authority, Dover District Council, has asked the Kent Wildlife Trust, owners of the reserve, to apply for retrospective planning permission to keep "Perkunas the Pole" in place. Area manager Ian Rickards said: "The artwork seems to be a hit with the walkers who have taken selfies and congratulated us on the installation, but we had no idea how it came to be there – it's a 'Totem' mystery!" He is now seeking its creator, "The local council has given us eight weeks to submit planning permission and it would be great to track down the person behind Perkunas to get a bit more detail so we can keep it".

A clue to its origins comes from the name carved on the pole; historian and folklorist (and recent FT contributor) Francis Young, author of *Pagans in the Early Modern Baltic*, says, "Perkunas is perhaps the best-known Baltic god. That is his Lithuanian name. He's the same as the Slavic god Perun. He's one of the top three or four gods in Baltic mythology, but not the most important. He's equivalent to the Norse god Thor and also wields a hammer." He was viewed as a positive figure and would be invoked for protection against thunderstorms. "Even in the 19th and 20th century, folklore lingers on and people invoke him when going out in the rain," Young said. Peter Morris, national trail manager of the North Downs Way, feels that



ABOVE: The mystery totem pole in the Capel-Le-Ferne nature reserve in Kent. TOP INSET: Wooden statue of Perkunas located in The Hill of Witches, an outdoor sculpture gallery near Juodkrante, Lithuania. BOTTOM INSET: The Wolin Svetovit

the thunder element could be relevant to its location, saying: "We're right on a coastal section between Folkestone and Dover, so we've got the Channel behind us and it is quite exposed, so it might have some reference to that."

Young says that the Kent pole appears to match descriptions of Lithuanian totems by 15th- and 16th-century Christian missionaries, who were attempting to convert what was then the last pagan country in Europe, but no illustrations of these originals survive. Jerzy Sikora, a mediæval archaeologist at the University of Łódź, feels that the totem looks similar to the Wolin Svetovit, a ninth- or 10th-century wooden carving

depicting Svetovit, a Slavic god of abundance and war, found in Poland in 1974. However, he said that the location of the pole was unusual, as the traditional ones were usually found in forest groves.

A visitor to the pole, Patrick Knill, 57, from Folkestone, said it reminded him of a prop from a dark metal band but was lacking some of the folksiness of Lithuanian sculptures he has seen. "It's a bit more Dingley Dell. There's nice fluting on the sides. People in Folkestone are used to art objects around the place. Are they making a pitch for next year's triennial?" *kentonline, 4 Aug; metro.co.uk, theguardian.com, 9 Aug 2023; kentwildlifetrust.org.uk.*

MAIN PHOTO: KENT WILDLIFE TRUST. HILL OF WITCHES: TURAIOS / CREATIVE COMMONS. WOLIN SVETOVIT: RZMADOWICZ1 / CREATIVE COMMONS



CLASSICAL CORNER

FORTEANA FROM THE ANCIENT WORLD COMPILED BY BARRY BALDWIN

288: DOING THE BYZ

“A Byzantine logothete, supported by all the flub dubs, mollicoddles, and flapdoodle pacifists” – Theodore Roosevelt on Woodrow Wilson.

Previous Classical Columns have often featured Roman Emperors. High time to bring on their Byzantine successors. There's a multitude of articles, books and websites, a fair number of individual biographies. Primary sources divide between complete accounts in chronicles and histories, and (often disjointed) fragments. For a rich sampling, I recommend Procopius, *Secret History*; Michael Psellus, *Fourteen Byzantine Rulers*; Anna Comnena, *Alexiad* – all in Penguin translations. For space-saving reasons, I offer a list of small snappers, eschewing the usual detailed references.

There's much futile modern debate over who was the first real Byzantine emperor. Some plump for Justinian I (527-65), others for Heraclius (610-41). Taking Occam's Razor in hand, I start with Constantine I ('The Great', 306-37), the founder of Constantinople, consecrated on 11 May 330. Constantine tempered his adoption of Christianity by throwing barbarian chiefs into the arena at Trier and murdering son Crispus and wife Fausta in complementary ways: the former was done in by what the sources call 'a cold poison', the latter by suffocation in an overheated sauna. Formal conversion was tactfully deferred until his deathbed when he could sin no more. This, and Jesus's lenience, were mocked by Julian as finale to his satirical *Cæsars*. As befits the last pagan ruler, Julian received the last message from Delphi, advising that the oracle was going out of business. Hopeful Christians believed his last words were "You've Won, Galilean." The Greek text actually supports a more plausible alternative: "You've Won, Sun God." – his favourite deity. However, the former holds sway, thanks to Swinburne's "Thou hast conquered, O Pale Galilean; the world has grown grey from thy breath."

Apart from devotion to wine and women, his short-lived successor Jovian was most distinguished for his height, allegedly 8-9ft (2.4-2.7m), so tall that he needed bespoke stays to maintain posture, thereby leaving an unusual legacy: Jovian Corsets (have seen website ads). Jovian either died from excess of mushrooms or asphyxiation from a charcoal brazier. Joint rulers followed, Valens and Valentinian. The former (one version) was burned alive in a shed when taking refuge from the military defeat

at Adrianople (AD 378). The latter died of apoplexy brought on by bellowing at diplomats. Next, Gratian, assassinated, and Valentinian II, found hanging: speculations ranged from suicide to murder. Theodosius I, last ruler of a united empire, abolished the Olympic Games as being "too pagan". In 1896, they were revived as the apogee of 'muscular Christianity'. Sons Arcadius and Honorius inherited separate thrones. The former's indolence provoked Bishop Synesius into rebuking him for having "the lifestyle of a mollusc". Honorius was famous for cowardice and devotion to his pet poultry – a logical combination.

Marcian introduced the pendilia hanging from his crown, a fashion that endured – rather Boy-Georgeish. Leo I has two contradictory distinctions. A soldier-emperor, he was nicknamed 'Butcher'. Yet he observed, "I'd like to see the day when military pay is transferred to the teachers."

Zeno had flapping kneecaps, which allowed him to run faster. Since he was noted for cowardice, this was a convenient deformity. He expired (in one version) when in a drunken stupor he was put into a coffin. Waking, he shouted for help, but wife-empress Ariadne would not have it opened. Zeno was briefly deposed by general Basiliscus, but soon overcame him. Having promised no bloodshed, he exposed the pretender and family in a dry cistern without food or water. Zeno was also the only emperor to succeed his own son, Leo II, a child who died at seven, his demise possibly expedited.

Anastasius was nicknamed 'Dikoros', the condition known as heterochromia – eyes of different colour. Justin I was illiterate, only able to sign documents with a stencil. So was his Western counterpart, Theodoric the Goth. According to Procopius, his nephew Justinian I was responsible for one trillion deaths, also stalking the palace corridors by night with his head floating above his shoulders. Successor Justin II anticipated George III by going mad, ending up being wheeled around the palace in a child's cart. Maurice was deposed by general Phocas, first Byzantine emperor to sport a beard – one of the later Constantines was nicknamed 'Beardy', possibly indicating he cultivated 'the full Marx'. Maurice was compelled to watch his six sons executed before his own torture and decapitation. Phocas was in turn overthrown and slain by Heraclius, an aquaphobe and probable sufferer from Peyronie's Disease.

Constantine V was nicknamed Copronymus ('Shit-Name'), either because he defecated in the font during infant baptism or because he enjoyed sniffing horse ordure. Constantine VIII was supposedly 9ft (2.7m) tall. Constantius II was praised for never spitting in public. This trivium may tell us something about Byzantine social etiquette.

Justinian II was deposed and had his nose slit, such mutilation disqualifying him for the throne. Turning his nose up at this, Justinian regained power and drowned the city in blood. Incidentally, he was the first emperor to issue a coin (gold) depicting Christ's head. Nose-Slitting ('Rhinitomia') was replaced by blinding, the fate of many an emperor or pretender. Exoculatory nadir was Irene's blinding of her own son to usurp his throne.

Basil II took 15,000 Bulgarian soldiers prisoner, blinded 99 of every 100, the others losing only one eye that they might guide the rest home. On seeing this horror, the Bulgarian king dropped dead. Hence Basil's nickname 'Bulgar-Slayer'. This atrocity may have been a delayed revenge for Krum the Bulgar's conversion of the skull of Nicephorus I into a drinking goblet from which Byzantine ambassadors were obliged to drink a toast. Basil I, out hunting, was thrown from his horse and impaled on the horns of a stag which dragged him 16 miles (26km) before an attendant caught up and disentangled him. Reward for this was instant execution as a suspected assassin. Basil then contracted a fever and died.

Having been blinded, Alexios V was killed in a novel way, flung from the column of Theodosius I. Most gruesome was the three-day torture of Andronicus I: right hand cut off, one eye gouged out, hair and teeth ripped away, finally dispatched by two soldiers competing who could plunge their swords in deepest.

Constantine XI, the last emperor, died in battle against the Turks. His body was never found. Supposedly it was turned into marble by an angel and hidden in a cave, waiting to return, rather like the priests celebrating the Last Mass in Santa Sophia who melted into the walls.

In 1968 there died Peter Mills, descended from an Isle of Wight plumber who claimed to be the true inheritor of the Byzantine throne – Wight or wong?

"It may be that the general style of architecture upon the moon is Byzantine." – Fort, *Books*, p432

PAUL SIEVEKING catalogues the latest finds, including a stone phallus and a silver phalera



RECORDING AN ASTEROID IMPACT

An ancient clay tablet recovered by Sir Henry Layard in 1851 from the underground library of King Ashurbanipal in Kuyunjik (ancient Nineveh), Iraq, is known as “the Planisphere” and designated No K8538 in the British Museum collection. An ancient Sumerian astronomer etched on the surface details of a massive object, visible in space, as it smashed through Earth’s atmosphere.

The tablet features intricate drawings of constellations and their names. Experts had been unable to understand exactly what the tablet conveyed; but that changed with the appearance of computer programs that could help simulate trajectories and reconstruct the night sky thousands of years ago. The Sumerian astronomer recorded the events he observed on 29 June 3123 BC. While 50 per cent of the clay tablet refers to the position of the planets and weather conditions, like cloud cover, the other half details how a massive object was seen approaching Earth. He described it as a “white stone bowl approaching...”

Deciding the event was of great importance, he noted the object’s trajectory relative to the stars. It was most likely the asteroid that impacted Köfels in Austria. According to experts, the astronomer accurately noted the object’s trajectory to an error of better than one degree. Based on the recorded observations, scientists have concluded that the object was probably an asteroid over one kilometre in diameter, most likely an Aten-type asteroid that orbited relatively close to the planet given its orbit.

The data on the tablet explains why there isn’t an actual impact crater at

The ancient Sumerian astronomer recorded how a massive object was seen approaching Earth



Köfels. Observations indicate that the asteroid’s incoming angle was as low as six degrees. This suggests the space rock most likely clipped a mountain on its way down (probably the tip of Gamskogel), causing it to disintegrate before reaching its final impact point. As it made its way down the valley, it turned into a gigantic fireball, around five kilometres in diameter. Impacting Köfels, it produced extremely

ABOVE LEFT: The ancient clay tablet known as the ‘Planisphere’ records the observations of a Sumerian astronomer in 3123 BC. **ABOVE RIGHT AND BELOW LEFT:** The carved Roman wooden figure uncovered by HS2 archaeologists in Buckinghamshire.

high pressures that caused the rock to pulverise. However, since it was no longer a solid object, it did not leave an impact crater behind. *archaeology-world*, 15 June 2023.

TWO ROMAN FINDS

• A carved wooden figure from the Roman Empire, thought to be from the first century AD, has been unearthed from a waterlogged ditch in a field near Twyford in Buckinghamshire, during the UK’s biggest ever archaeological dig along the 150-mile (240km) HS2 rail route. The 26in (67cm) tall figure, 7in (18cm) wide, carved from a single piece of wood, was prevented from rotting by the lack of oxygen in the ditch. It is wearing a knee-length tunic that seems to be gathered at the waist. It may be wearing a hat, or have stylised hair, and has well defined legs, although the feet and arms below the elbows have degraded. A small piece of the statue, found broken off in the ditch, has been sent for radiocarbon dating. Wooden figures of this type were often prepared as burial goods, or as gifts to the gods.

Other finds along the HS2 route include a vast Roman settlement in Northamptonshire, 16th century gardens in Warwickshire and the world’s oldest railway roundhouse in Birmingham. *Guardian*, *D.Express*, *ancient-origins.net*, 13 Jan 2023.

- A silver phalera (military decoration) featuring the snake-covered head of Medusa was discovered on 6 June 2023 at the site of Vindolanda, the Roman auxiliary fort near Hadrian's Wall. According to a Facebook post, "The phalera was uncovered from a barrack floor, dating to the Hadrianic period of occupation [i.e. after AD 122]." Because phalerae were awarded for "valour in battle", military men would attach them to straps and wear them during local parades.

Medusa – known for having snakes for hair and the ability to turn people into stone with a mere glance – is mentioned in many Greek myths. In the most famous story, the Greek hero Perseus beheads Medusa as she sleeps, pulling off the feat by using Athena's polished shield to indirectly look at the gorgon so that he wouldn't be petrified. During the Roman age, Medusa was seen as apotropaic, meaning her likeness was thought to repel evil. Her serpent-surrounded head is also seen on Roman-era tombs, mosaics in posh villas and battle armour. For instance, in the famous first-century mosaic of Alexander the Great from Pompeii, Alexander is depicted with the face of Medusa on his breastplate. *livescience.com*, 28 June 2023.

BRONZE AGE STEEL

Intricate 2,900-year-old engravings on stone monuments in Portugal could only have been made using steel instruments. The discovery hints at small-scale steel production during the Final Bronze Age. The 5ft-tall (1.5m) rock pillars, or stelæ, made of silicate quartz sandstone, feature carvings of human and animal figures, weapons, ornaments and chariots.

"This is an extremely hard rock that cannot be worked with bronze or stone tools," said Ralph Araque Gonzalez, an archaeologist at the University of Freiburg. "The people of the Final Bronze Age in Iberia were capable of tempering steel. Otherwise they would not have been able to work the pillars." Tempering is the process of heat-treating steel to make it harder and more resistant to fracturing.

Analysis of an "astoundingly well preserved" iron chisel unearthed in the early 2000s from a site called Rocha do Vigio in Portugal and dating to around 900 BC showed it contained enough carbon to be considered steel (more than 0.30%). The researchers also found iron mineralisation within the settlement site, suggesting that craftspeople may have sourced the material locally.

Up until now, the earliest record of hardened steel in Iberia was from the Early Iron Age (800 to 600 BC). Widespread steel production for weapons and tools probably only began during Roman times, around the second century AD, although the low carbon

content of excavated objects points to their mediocre quality. It wasn't until the late mediæval period that blacksmiths across Europe learned how to achieve high enough temperatures to make good quality steel. *livescience.com*, 9 Mar 2023.

PHALLIC SHARPENER

A six-inch (15cm) stone penis has been dug up at the mediæval Tower of Meira in Ria de Vigo, Spain. Based on the history of the Tower of Meira, experts believe it was used to sharpen weapons. The site was partially destroyed during the mid-15th century when citizens revolted against the ruling class. Throughout history, phallic emblems have been found on a wide range of objects from decorative furniture in homes to prints on walls. Many once believed the symbol acted as protection from evil – with babies even



TOP: The six-inch stone phallus unearthed at the mediæval Tower of Meira in Spain. ABOVE: A silver phalera showing the head of Medusa discovered at the site of a Roman auxiliary fort near Hadrian's Wall.

wearing penises on their necks for good luck, according to New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art. "The phallus was an object of veneration and was given a magical-religious cult," said a spokesman for the museum. "The phallic symbol is represented on lamps, masks, pendants amulets and rings, walls of houses, pavements, street corners, balconies, doors, or baths. Always preserving its character as a collective protector from potential evils and dangers." That said, such phallic symbolism is not common in mediæval contexts. *dailymail.co.uk*, 14 June 2023.

PHALLIC FUNGI

Phallic-shaped fungi, that grew nearly twice as tall as a double-decker bus and weighed as much as a large elephant, used to dominate what is now the Welsh landscape. The huge fungi, called Prototaxites, were burnt in a huge wildfire during the Silurian period around 430 million years ago. The charred remains – found at Rumney a few miles outside Cardiff – are thought to be from a massive forest of the 'funky' giant fungi with very few plants growing on land at that time, before the age of woody plants. A column of Prototaxites could grow up to 8m (26ft) in height and about a metre (3ft) in diameter, and weigh up to 10 metric tonnes. It was the tallest living thing on Earth. *Wales on Sunday*, 3 July 2022.

WELSH ATLANTIS?

The story of a lost and sunken land off the west coast of Wales was long thought to have been a myth – but the 13th century Gough Map, held in Oxford Bodleian Library, clearly marks a pair of islands, each about a quarter the size of Anglesey, in Cardigan Bay. Simon Haslett, Honorary Professor of Physical Geography at Swansea University, and David Willis, Jesus Professor of Celtic at Oxford University, believe that their discovery provides geographical evidence that the island, known as Cantre'r Gwaelod, was indeed real.

The map – believed to be the earliest complete map of the British Isles – depicts one island offshore between Aberystwyth and Aberdyfi, and the other further north towards Barmouth, Gwynedd. It is not known whether the islands are supposed to have been there in the 13th century, or were marked there because of accounts of their previous existence (rising sea levels after the last Ice Age could have played a part in making the islands disappear). A lost land is mentioned in the 13th century Black Book of Carmarthen; and coordinates recorded by the Roman cartographer Ptolemy suggest that the coastline two millennia ago may have been some eight miles (13km) further west than it is today. *BBC News*, 21 Aug; *D.M.ail, Guardian*, 22 Aug 2022.



Commando Lava

DAVID HAMBLING looks back at the Pentagon's top secret efforts to weaponise mud in Vietnam

Geo-engineering, using slight tweaks to the environment to produce significant effects, is being considered as a counter to climate change. For example, small amounts of finely powdered salt might be sprayed into the upper atmosphere to reflect solar radiation. It will come as no surprise to FT readers that back in the dark days of the Cold War, Pentagon scientists explored the military potential of such techniques with unexpected results.

During the Vietnam War, outside assistance was an enormous factor. American military planners believed that if they could stop supplies from other countries reaching the Viet Cong, victory would follow. Massed bombing of the network of paths known as the Ho Chi Minh trail failed to stop the flow of battered Soviet and Chinese trucks. Something smarter was needed. Project Popeye used the established method of cloud-seeding with silver iodide to increase rainfall. The goal was to make road surfaces unusable, wash away river crossings and cause landslides to block roads. However, as with other cloud-seeding efforts, there is no good evidence that seeding increased rainfall. But this was the 1960s, and Better Living Through Chemistry was a slogan to live by. There must be a chemical solution, and it was called Commando Lava.

Commando Lava was classified Top Secret and involved flights by three C-130 Hercules transport aircraft of the 374th Troop Carrier Wing making drops over sections of the Ho Chi Minh trail in Laos and South Vietnam. The crews were informed that they were participating in a test involving the airdropping of highly sensitive loads. Commando Lava documents carefully avoided the word 'chemical', instead referring to a 'compound, substance or material' so nobody would confuse it with chemical warfare. The substance in question came in the form of a powder, and crews called it 'soap' or 'detergent', though in fact it was neither.

The material, developed by Dow Chemical Corporation, was a mixture of Trisodium Nitrotri-acetic acid, used for softening water, and Sodium Tripolyphosphate, now known as E451, an emulsifier which prevents mixes containing oil and water from separating out. And according to the makers, the mix turned normal mud into glutinous super-mud, making dirt roads impassable to wheeled vehicles.

"Rain falling on these chemicals results



According to the makers, the mix turned normal mud into glutinous super-mud

in chelation and dispersion of soil, in such measure that mud loses all consistency and becomes incapable of supporting vehicles or any other substantial weight," reported William Sullivan, US Ambassador to Laos. "This not only vastly enhances nature's own mud making in quality, but also extends the effect of the rainy season because of the chemicals' persistency."

Sullivan went on to enthusiastically suggest that the solution would close the trail more cheaply and effectively than bombs, not just for the entire rainy season but for up to a month afterwards. "Chelation may prove better than escalation," Sullivan snappily observed. He also foresaw tactical uses for the compound. "I have asked that another experiment be carried out concerning hand application of these chemicals to defence perimeters," said Sullivan. "We may be able to develop some use for this technique in an anti-personnel sense as well." In other words, creating artificial quicksand to defeat the enemy. Many commentators at the time described Vietnam as a quagmire. Sullivan may have been the only person who thought this sounded like a neat idea. "Make mud, not war!" he cheerily concluded.

After the initial trial, the mud-making was scaled up with Commando Lava II, involving 10 aircraft each flying two sorties per day for 10 days. Each aircraft carried about 500 kilos of the compound in small bags on pallets. They had to fly at low level to make accurate drops, generally in formations of three aircraft, and on some occasions the

LEFT: A stretch of the Ho Chi Minh trail after bombing by US planes.

planes took minor damage from ground fire. Seemingly, the Viet Cong did not have anything more than machine-guns to hand and no aircraft were brought down or crew injured.

The big question was whether the chelating agent would make the trails impassable. Follow-up aerial reconnaissance indicated it did not. Investigation suggested that the Vietnamese had hurried to the areas covered by the compound and inconsiderately removed it from the trail; close reconnaissance of the second site indicated that they had spread "gravel or other aggregate" over the affected areas, not an original solution to mud but sufficient to nullify the marsh-making material.

Commando Lava never officially ended, but interest faded and no further drops were undertaken. While neither Popeye nor Commando Lava were notably successful, they drew strong reactions when details came out in the celebrated Pentagon Papers, documents from then Secretary of Defence Robert McNamara leaked to the press in 1971. Politicians were outraged at the covert scientific tinkering. The toxic defoliant Agent Orange had been used openly in Vietnam in Operation Ranch Hand, although not without considerable debate. The implication was that these secret geoengineering projects were even more sinister.

American politicians quickly voted through acts to outlaw any further clandestine attempts to change the environment. The rest of the world seemed to agree and in 1976 the Environmental Modification Convention, an international treaty extending the terms of the Geneva Convention, came into force. This prohibits the military or other hostile use of environmental modification techniques with widespread, long-lasting or severe effects.

Mud can be pretty unpleasant, as any veteran festival-goer will attest, and it is easy to see how it might become a weapon. However, despite repeated claims about chemtrails, there has been no further sign of US military geo-engineering for some decades. Geo-engineering these days will only be used for peaceful purposes. However, Commando Lava may have at least one valuable lesson for us: the results of any experiment may not be what the experimenters had in mind.



MEDICAL BAG

Appointments this month for a double-wombed Israeli mother, a Somali woman with a bullet in an awkward place and a 'pregnant' Jordanian man

DOUBLE-BARRELLED

Israeli woman Elle Ladowitz was born with the rare condition *uterus didelphys*, which means she has a double uterus, something she had been aware of since she was 20. As a result, as soon as she found she was pregnant she consulted her doctors. "All these years I was afraid that the baby would be in the right uterus which was smaller. When the doctor first checked my pregnancy he nearly fainted and it took him 10 minutes until he told me that I have a foetus in each uterus." Medics at Ichilov Hospital in Tel Aviv monitored Ladowitz's pregnancy closely and delivered the babies, a boy and a girl, by C-section at 35 weeks. Both were healthy, and Ladowitz said: "The twins are cute and amazing and I'm sure that even though they didn't meet until now they will be best friends." Her case was extremely rare – there are fewer than 15 medically documented cases of twins born from separate wombs in *uterus didelphys* patients. *vinnews.com*, 2 Jan 2022.

HIT IN THE BITS

The *International Journal of Surgery Case Reports* published a paper on what was described as "the first reported injury of its kind" that described emergency surgery carried out in Somalia on a woman with a bullet lodged in her clitoris. The unnamed 24-year-old patient had been relaxing at home, when, she reported, a stray bullet came through the ceiling and struck her in the crotch. She took herself to the Erdogan Hospital in Mogadishu where a CT scan showed that the projectile had lodged itself inside her clitoris. Doctors were able to remove the bullet under local anaesthetic and the victim did not experience any complications from the operation so was discharged the next day "in good condition". The paper's authors report that she was fortunate not to be injured more seriously and had been struck by a low velocity "tired bullet". They explained that "Tired



ABOVE: Elle and David Ladowitz holding their twins born from Elle's two wombs.

bullet injuries are caused by low-velocity bullets, commonly seen in residential areas in war-torn countries such as Somalia." The medics said: "We thought it to be rare and interesting. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first wayward bullet injury penetrating the vulvar area [the outer part of the female genitals] with a retained bullet in the clitoris." *nypost.com*, 26 Apr 2023.

PREGNANT MAN?

A Jordanian man referred to hospital for tests after suffering from excruciating abdominal pain caused considerable consternation for his doctors. When he got the man's test results, Dr Hussam Abu Farsakh said: "A 42-year-old man experiencing stomach pain tested positive on a pregnancy test, which came as a complete surprise to the entire clinic." Further investigation showed that the man was suffering from a tumour that had metastasised to the liver. Farsakh said: "Following an abdominal CT scan, we obtained multiple tumour samples. Microscopic examination revealed the tumour was secreting pregnancy hormones, leading to the positive pregnancy test." While tumours secreting pregnancy hormones are known to occur in women,

this is believed to be the first recorded in a man. *jpost.com*, 27 Jun 2023.

FLORIDA MAN

Donnie Adams, 52, broke up a fight between two relatives at a family gathering in Riverview, Florida, during which one of them bit him on the leg. A few days later, the bite on his left thigh showed signs of swelling, forming a small bump, and he visited the local hospital where he was given a tetanus shot and antibiotics. However, three days later, things were still getting worse. "My leg was very sore. I couldn't walk. It was very warm and very painful," Adams said. When he returned to HCA Florida Northside Hospital in St Petersburg, Dr Fritz Brink, who treated his wound, found grey fluid seeping out of his flesh as soon as he cut into the tissue. This is a sign of necrotising fasciitis, or "flesh eating" disease, an infection that can be caused by various types of bacteria that trigger intense inflammation that kills infected tissue and can result in sepsis and organ failure, with up to one in five people infected dying from it. Adams had two

rounds of surgery to remove the infected tissue and lost about 70 per cent of the flesh from the front of his thigh, spending three weeks in hospital and needing six months of after-care to ensure the wound healed properly. It's not known whether the bacteria that caused the infection came from the bite or entered the wound afterwards, but Brink said that it was certainly possible they came from the biting relative's mouth and that he was unaware of any other cases of necrotising fasciitis originating from a human bite. Adams is reconciled with his feuding relatives and says: "The parties involved are very sorrowful." *livescience.com*, 9 Jun 2023.

LONG STRANGE TRIP

Colorado-based psychedelics startup company Medicinal Mindfulness is seeking approval from the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to carry out research on the drug N,N-Dimethyltryptamine, usually known as DMT. When taken in a single dose DMT gives users an intense five-to-10-minute experience, during which they enter what seems to be a different plane or dimension where they sometimes meet other entities, which psychonaut Terence McKenna referred to as "machine elves". Medicinal Mindfulness are planning a study they are calling 'DMTx', which provides the experimenter with a continuous intravenous drip of DMT in an attempt to prolong their time

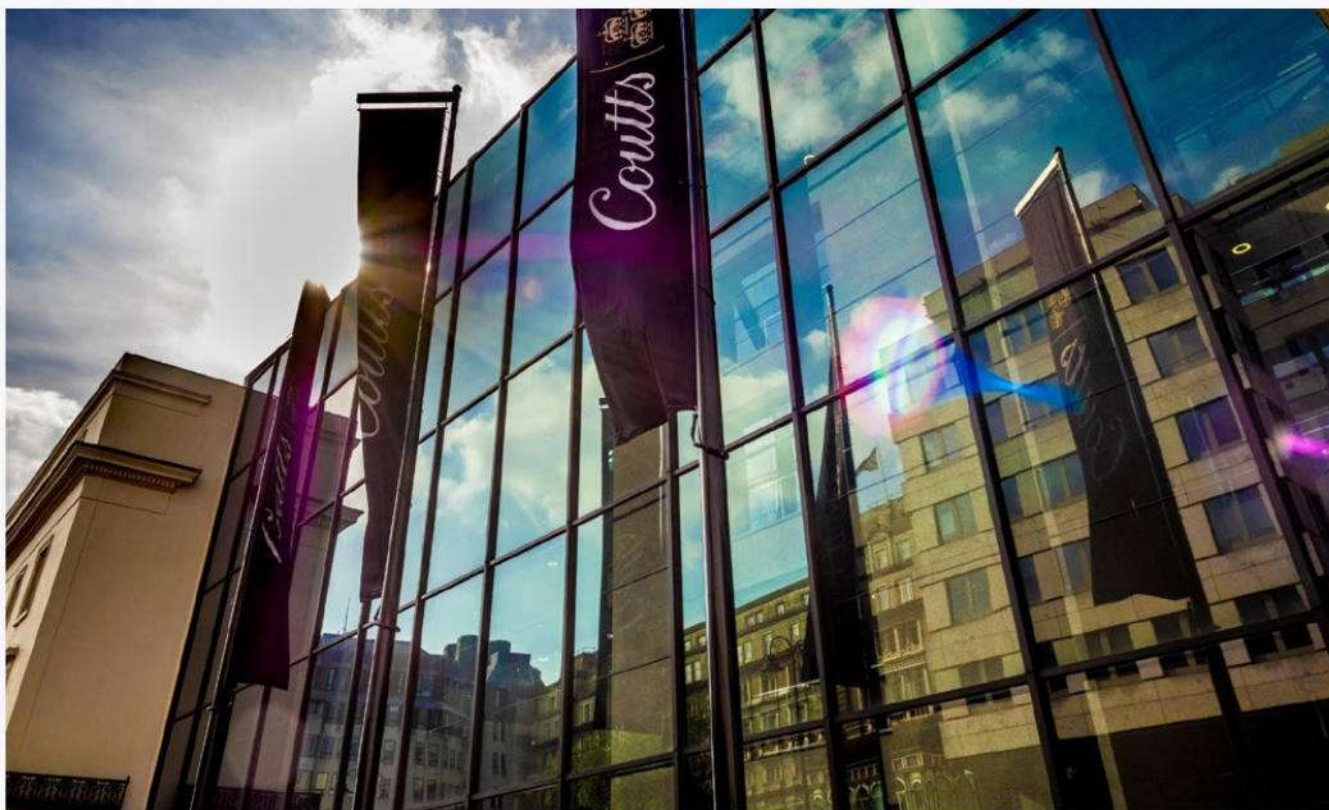
in DMT space to hours or even days. One aspect of the experiment will look at whether two people hooked to DMT drips in different rooms would be able to communicate inside the trip, which is part of the experiment's attempt to ascertain whether people are actually entering a shared alternate dimension when they take the drug. *futurism.com*, 1 May 2023.





The Curious Case of the Coutts Ghost

ALAN MURDIE recounts how medium Eddie Burks was called in to rid the bank of a spectral visitor



BAILEY-COOPER PHOTOGRAPHY / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ABOVE: Coutts Bank on London's Strand – unwanted customers include Nigel Farage and the ghost of an Elizabethan nobleman.

As I write this in July 2023, Coutts Bank is suffering a tide of uncomfortable publicity over the closure of a bank account for the Brexit politician Nigel Farage. Amid the furore – and I may be the only one to recall all this – mention of the prestigious Coutts brings back for me some entirely different associations, memories of another time when the bank was caught up in controversy, long before anyone had heard of Mr Farage or his bank account. This was back in 1993, when the news was not about Coutts barring an unwanted customer but its efforts in ridding itself of an unwelcome ghost (see **FT69:16, 80:19**).

Generating breathless headlines such as 'Haunted Coutts calls in the ghostbuster' this was a story of alarmed bank staff, a 70-year-old medium named Eddie Burks, a distinguished aristocratic and titled family, a Roman Catholic priest and a ghostly Elizabethan noble beheaded in 1572. And though not mentioned at the time, it also has links with another ghost story and the mysterious death of a wealthy young lord in

Having an active ghost prowling Coutts posed unquantifiable and uninsurable risks

Norfolk in 1569.

It all began in 1992 when four reception staff at Coutts headquarters on the Strand, opposite Charing Cross Station, London, all reported strange manifestations. This was surprising since it was a building exuding modernity, constructed with reinforced glass, chrome and steel and with an escalator. Lights flickered on and off, temperature drops and electrical malfunctions occurred, and a dark shadowy figure was seen crossing the atrium. The ghost appeared male and with one witness reporting it seemingly lacked a head. Soon this inflated into stories of a headless ghost wandering the bank and the Strand.

This all placed Coutts & Co in a major quandary. Reputation is all with financial institutions and those bearing fiduciary duties and handling the wealth of others. They worry intensely over negative media and their public image. Such sensitivity helps explain why haunted banks are something of a rarity, with staff told to keep quiet about any hauntings in branches. As bankers for Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, Coutts certainly enjoyed a reputation. Banks are also institutions that are (or at least should be) instinctively cautious. Having an active ghost prowling Coutts posed unquantifiable and uninsurable risks, not least the prospect of upsetting customers and investors. How could one guard against an immaterial entity such as a ghost, walking through walls and bypassing every barrier and alarm system? Who knows what dangers to security a ghost could pose or what havoc it might wreak? Although in 1993 electronic and virtual banking had yet to achieve the all-

encompassing domination of today, talk of unaccountable electrical failures alone must have been enormously concerning. What if a valued client of the bank were to see the ghost? One can appreciate the discomfort was wretched for banking chiefs, attempting to weigh up an ever-expanding set of disconcerting scenarios.

The seniors at Coutts turned to the bank archivist, an erudite lady who thought of contacting the College of Psychic Studies in Kensington for advice. This led to the engagement of medium Eddie Burks, a retired civil engineer and civil servant living in Lincoln, who specialised in spirit release. A council member of the College, he agreed to come to the bank on 14 August 1992.

Burks first became fascinated by paranormal phenomena in childhood after a Near Death Experience as a five-year-old during a tonsillectomy. Aged 13, he studied Nandor Fodor's *Encyclopaedia of Psychic Science* (1934) but did not manifest any psychic abilities until he was middle-aged. He told researcher Ian Wilson his gifts lay in contacting spirits and helping them depart, and these only arose after his wife died aged just 48. The very next day he sensed her presence, which brought him comfort. In the wake of this revelation of her survival, his psychic gifts arrived, with Burks initially working as a healer. Then, in 1983, he came into mediumship, concentrating on rescuing trapped spirits. He worked alone and charged no fee for his services (in 1993, he also investigated the Heol Fanog case; **FT430:30-39**).

Burks averred he made contact with the Coutts ghost almost immediately, engaging in a telepathic conversation. Those watching Burks saw nothing

but heard him describing how he was communicating with a tall, slim male figure dressed in a doublet, hose and ruff, and wearing shoes with silver buckles. Burks sensed the phantom was once a man of considerable social standing and was impatient to speak to him, the ghost declaring: "I have been waiting a long time, yet you continue to keep me waiting". The ghost proceeded to explain to Burks he was once a man of the law, perceived as a threat to 'Her Majesty' and subjected to trumped-up treason charges for which he had been beheaded. He told Burks that his execution occurred in summertime, not far away from the bank. The ghost also drew attention to the jewellery it was wearing – whether from pride or at an attempt at identification is unclear, adding that before his beheading he removed his ruff and put on his legal gown, obviously wanting to die every inch a learned man and gentleman.

Burks then became aware of a second, female, presence manifesting, which he sensed was the daughter of this ghostly gentleman. Burks later wrote: "I then saw his daughter approaching. I knew he had great love for her. As I said this, he immediately responded: 'You lift my heart, for she was dear to me'".

This female apparition was arrayed in a white Tudor costume and radiated light and beauty. She approached the man and took him by the hands. According to Burks, "They turned, walking towards the Light... He then looked back for a moment to thank us for helping him...". And then they vanished.

This whole interaction had taken about 45 minutes. Giving the chance for the ghost to air its grievance seemed to be all that was needed. The Coutts haunting

seems to have ended immediately with no more uncanny incidents subsequently reported. The bank was able to breathe a corporate sigh of relief.

And with the unidentified ghost having departed, the matter would have ended, had Eddie Burks not gone on to write this up for the obscure Spiritualist journal *Light*, published since the 19th century and appearing through the College of Psychic Studies. His brief account was picked up by a journalist for whom mention of Coutts as the bankers for the Queen, and the cliché of a headless Tudor ghost, were all too good to ignore. The news of the ghost and its deliverance were published as a front-page story in the *Sunday Telegraph* on 21 February 1993, creating a sensation.

As it happened, this article was read by Father Francis Edwards, a priest in charge at Corpus Christi Catholic Church in Covent Garden. An expert on Tudor history, he offered a plausible identity for the spirit, the clue arising in it being a nobleman executed in the summer. From this Father Edwards positively identified the ghost as Thomas Howard, the Fourth Duke of Norfolk, beheaded on 2 June 1572 for plotting to marry Mary Queen of Scots in an attempt to seize the Crown. And Father Edwards was the person to know, having written a biography, *The Marvellous Chance: Thomas Howard, Fourth Duke of Norfolk, and the Ridolphi Plot* (1968) on how the Duke died a 'martyr to history'. Father Edwards considered "the Duke was given a raw deal by his contemporaries... he was guiltless... the charge of treason was trumped up".

Having identified the Coutts ghost to his own satisfaction, Father Edwards astutely



ABOVE LEFT: Medium and member of the College of Psychic Studies Eddie Burks was called in to try and get rid of the bank's inquiet spirit.

ABOVE RIGHT: Jesuit priest, scholar and author Father Francis Edwards came up with a convincing identity for the Coutts spook.



ABOVE LEFT: Thomas Howard the Fourth Duke of Norfolk, beheaded in 1572, was Father Edwards's prime suspect in the Coutts ghost affair.
ABOVE RIGHT: The ruins of Thetford Priory, where in 1569 the young Lord George Dacre died in a suspicious accident involving a vaulting horse.

grasped an opportunity now existed for the Church to span the centuries and celebrate a special Mass for the soul of Thomas Howard. Accordingly, he invited the living members of the Norfolk family to commemorate their illustrious forebear at his church. Far more surprisingly, he also invited along Eddie Burks, notwithstanding the opposition of the Catholic Church to Spiritualist practices. It seems that Father Edwards took a long view, knowing modern Spiritualism is a comparatively recent development, dating only from 1848, whereas the Church of Rome claims 2,000 years of praying about the dead, even if interrupted in Britain during the Reformation, and until toleration of the practice returned in 1829.

Thus, a most unusual service airing contrasting conceptions of the afterlife was held during November, the traditional month for prayers for the dead, at Corpus Christi Catholic Church in Covent Garden. It was attended by Miles Norfolk, the Duke of Norfolk and Earl of Arundel (1926-2002), his wife the Duchess and a sizeable group of friends and relatives, all joining in prayers for repose of the soul of Thomas Howard. Journalists noted Burks's address, describing the apparition of the woman in white who radiated beauty, was "met with baffled silence from the congregation" (*Independent*, 16 Nov 1993). Confusing the press yet further was a declaration outside the service by the Duke of Norfolk – himself the owner of several haunted properties – that he did not believe in ghosts. However, I suspect the bafflement of journalists owed more to their failure to comprehend the subtleties

Popular opinion suspected Sir Richard of deliberately sabotaging the equipment

of either Catholic or Spiritualistic doctrines. As the philosopher Dr CEM Joad famously put it: "Well, it all depends on what you mean by a ghost."

While Thomas Howard was held up as an aristocratic victim of a miscarriage of justice, no one thought fit to mention his link to another suspicious death in Tudor times. This was the death in May 1569 of his stepson, Lord George Dacre, the wealthy young heir to a fortune at a Norfolk property owned by the Duke.

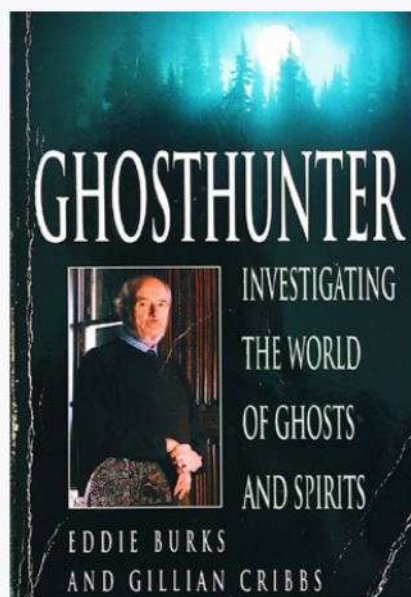
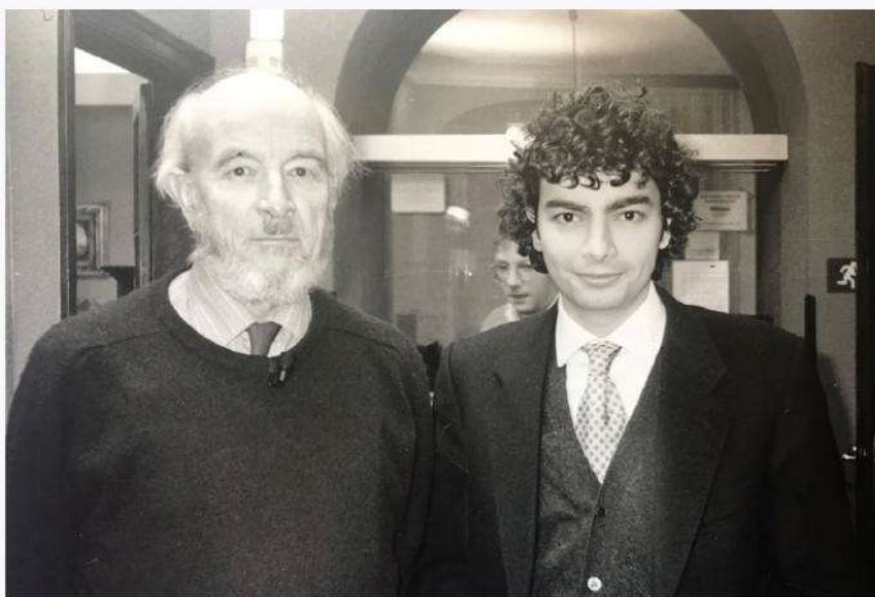
After being widowed twice, early in 1567 Thomas Howard married his third wife – Elizabeth, the widow of Thomas, Lord Dacre of Gillesland. She was mother to a young George and three daughters, who all joined the Howard family. It proved a short-lived union, as Elizabeth died just months later in September 1567, leaving Thomas Howard with the four orphans. Becoming their ward, he planned marriages between the three girls and his own sons, aiming at absorbing their portion of the Dacre estates into his family. Meanwhile, he packed off George, the male heir, to the care of a close friend, Sir Richard Fulmerston, housing him at Thetford Priory. Howard justified the move on the basis that the Norfolk air would suit the lad.

At Thetford Priory, Fulmerston allowed the boy the run of the long gallery as a playroom. It was here on 17 May 1569 Lord Dacre died, falling from a vaulting horse and suffering a head injury so severe that it "beat out his brains". This was ruled a tragic accident, but popular opinion thought otherwise, suspecting Sir Richard of deliberately sabotaging the equipment by removing its pins so it collapsed under Henry. With the young lord dead, the Dacre estates passed to his three sisters, who were set to wed Howard's sons.

The boy's uncle, Leonard Dacre, as the next in line, challenged this outcome and may purposefully have spread rumours about the sabotaged vaulting horse to smear the Duke. However, the Norfolks triumphed when the Estates Commissioners ruled in favour of the daughters inheriting, and Thomas Howard ensured they enjoyed arranged marriages with his sons, extinguishing the Dacre family claim for good. However, the Duke did not live to see the full benefits of this expansion of the family fortunes, with some alleging his death was divine retribution for having taken over Thetford Priory in the first place.

When some 166 years later, the historian Bloomfield called at Thetford Priory in 1738, he found allegations of murder still alive in the rustic minds of the caretakers who "pretended to shew you the blood of an unhappy youth who was here slain by a fall from a wooden horse".

Bloomfield was unimpressed, deriding this as "mere fiction" and commented: "The spots on the wall were nothing more than is seen in many plasterings."



ABOVE LEFT: Eddie Burks with prominent Italian sceptic Massimo Polidoro during the investigation of a supposedly haunted villa in Breganzona, Italy.

ABOVE RIGHT: Following the Coutts case, Burks became an unlikely psychic celebrity and co-wrote a book with the journalist who broke the story.

Additionally he was told the ghost of Fulmerston returned and heard “the frightful stories among the vulgar of that knight’s appearing so often, to the terror of many”. Later stories added a spectral Thomas Howard riding in the grounds in a phantom carriage, and eventually little Lord Dacre himself returned, careering down the long gallery on a spectral rocking horse. (See *In Breckland Wilds*, 1925, by WG Clarke).

Perhaps fortunately, no one brought this up at the time of the Coutts bank ghost story. As it was, the publicity earned Burks wide recognition and propelled him into psychic celebrity. For a period he became the best-known spirit clearance medium in Britain, impressing many with his modest demeanour, obvious sincerity and apparently successful results in bringing hauntings to an end. Gillian Cribbs, the journalist who broke the Coutts Bank story in the *Sunday Telegraph*, penned a book – *Ghosthunter: Investigating the World of Ghosts and Spirits* (1994) – detailing his activities. Burks also appeared in a BBC2 40 Minutes TV special entitled ‘Ghost Train’, taking him to a haunted RAF base at Linton-On-Ouse in Yorkshire. Entering the former control-tower, Burks contacted an airman killed in a road accident. The TV producer Martin Connor was reportedly impressed, as some details seemingly tied up with the death of a serviceman in the 1950s.

Ian Wilson featured the Coutts story in his *In Search of Ghosts* (1995), and rather gave Burks the benefit of any doubt, since he could match the unquiet spirit interpretation to his own strongly Catholic leanings, treating ghosts as entities in need of prayers and funeral rites. But it

does not pay to be too trusting with claims by mediums, not because their sincerity is always to be questioned but, because we simply aren’t in a position to know the truth.

One pronounced doubter records in a predictably partisan Wikipedia entry that Italian sceptic Massimo Polidoro accompanied Burks to a haunted villa in Breganzona where the medium declared contact with a young woman who had died there. However, Polidoro found no historical evidence for this. (See Polidoro’s 2003 book, *Secrets of the Psychics*.) Analogous objections might also apply to the Coutts Bank ghost. Why should the 4th Duke show up 420 years after his death at a modern bank to make a nuisance of himself, rather than frequent places he once lived, or his execution site? And just how secure is the proposed Thomas Howard identification, anyway? (Compare with how much proof is needed opening a bank account these days).

However, such criticisms ultimately rank as trite objections, not even approaching the profundity of the sundering epistemological challenges that living human consciousness presents, let alone establishing any survival of it after death. We have no way of determining if the spirit of Thomas Howard really conversed with Burks or if it was fantasy (conscious or unconscious) from start to finish. Or – presuming a spirit was present – whether it had any connection with the Tudor aristocrat it claimed to be, or any of the spooky goings-on reported at Coutts Bank before Burks arrived. But then perhaps such links are not spatial, but occur on some other level of meaning.

Even some mediums have declared themselves at a loss as to the source of their communications (e.g. Leonora Piper, Eileen Garrett, Geraldine Cummins). As was said by a judge, Chief Justice Brian, in the reign of Edward VI, in the century before Thomas Howard walked the Earth, “The Devil himself knoweth not the mind of man”, and we’re not much further forward today. (per Chief Justice Brian, *Yearbook Pas 17 Edw IV f1, pl 2*)

Whether Eddie Burks or any other medium, channeller or shaman is actually touched by spirit influences or it all just comes from their own brains is a question currently not possible to answer with finality.

It is interesting that Burks said he read Nandor Fodor’s *Encyclopaedia of Psychic Science* (1934) when he was young. Interesting, because Fodor was a Spiritualist who abandoned belief in spirits and converted wholeheartedly to the doctrines of Sigmund Freud (he later also wrote a dictionary of psychoanalysis). Did Fodor’s change from investigating troubled spirits to airing repressed complexes from the unconscious mind, in anyway influence the direction that Eddie Burks took? Burks was a medium who viewed his mission as healing troubled spirits, a form of therapy for the dead, whereas for Fodor it became helping resolve the unconscious conflicts within the minds of the living.

Unfortunately, Eddie Burks himself has now passed on (he died in 2005) so we can no longer question him directly – or discover whether he liked historical fiction or television programmes with Tudors in them.



STRANGE CONTINENT | ULRICH MAGIN brings the Euro-weirdness: the BVM in a tree, Shrek in a field and a new lake monster

POLISH MIRACLE TREE

In Parczew in eastern Poland people venerate an image of the Blessed Virgin (or, some say, Jesus Christ) they discovered in an oak tree. Despite both scientists and Church officials declaring the image to be explicable, the stream of pilgrims steadily increases. Parczew, a small town of 10,000 souls, was previously famous for its vinegar and mustard, but since early summer 2023, when believers started to see the face in the cracks and colours of the bark of an oak, it has also become a holy place for some.

The faithful now assemble at the tree, light candles and say prayers. Some touch the tree, others kneel before it. On park banks nearby, the pious sit and play hymns on their smart phones. "I really believe this is an apparition," said one woman. "I heard of it via friends and had to come here. It is a sign of divine providence." And a woman who lives near the tree agreed: "God wants to tell us something. I am so afraid of the war."

However, Internet users of a more secular bent have poked fun at the alleged apparition. "Once again, the Mother of God chose to appear in some Polish small town rather than in New York, in Tokyo or in beautiful Barcelona," one post read.

The diocese of Siedlce, to which Parczew belongs, does not plan to investigate the image. "No, we do not find miracles in trees or in glass sherds," said Jacek Swiatek, spokesperson for the diocese; he even made fun of the image, saying he thought it looked more like Conchita Wurst, the Austrian drag queen known from the European Song Contest, than the Madonna.

Mateusz Fieducik, a forest expert, said that people want to perceive faces in natural features: the well-known phenomenon of pareidolia.



"The image will change as the tree grows," he said, "and after some time, the face will simply disappear. Such cracks and colours are completely normal in bark."

Naturally, such arguments do not convince the faithful. "It has now lasted for so many days and just does not go away," one said. "I think this is something supernatural. Maybe Jesus wants us to pray? Or perhaps this is a sort of revelation."

The philosopher of religion, Zbigniew Mikołajko, saw a wider context. "A miracle, for many of us, is the last way out. Unable to safeguard our health or happiness in any other way, we resort to supernatural powers to help us." In the strongly Catholic environment of Poland, such miracles tend to take the form of apparitions.

Apparently, some people living near the tree were starting to get fed up with the increased traffic, while others have taken the miracle in

The faithful assemble at the tree, light candles and say prayers

their own hands: one sceptic sells leaves from the tree and donates the proceeds to social causes. www.mdr.de, 18 June 2023.

SPY WHALE RETURNS

A beluga whale with instruments that might be used for espionage was recently sighted in Sweden. The instruments bore Russian instructions. The white whale was first spotted in 2019 in Norway when it was nicknamed Hvaldimir (FT381:10-11). However, it might just be a test animal that had escaped from its enclosure. lavanguardia.com, 1 June 2023.

LEFT: Jesus, the BVM or Conchita Wurst in a Polish tree. BELOW LEFT: 'Spy Whale' Hvaldimir popped up in Sweden.

STRANGE CRIMES

When German custom officers stopped a man at the Belgian border and searched his van, they found more than a ton of unrefrigerated fish as well as fried bats. The 31-year-old driver, who had neither driving license nor passport and drove an uninsured vehicle, was arrested for violations of hygiene laws, and it was also possible that the bats were of a protected species. Why the man from Cote d'Ivoire was smuggling these unappealing edibles is not really clear. web.de, 12 April 2023.

In Naumburg, in the east of Germany, unknown criminals stole 120 tons of discarded railway track worth some 40,000 Euros sometime between 25 April and 3 May – and apparently without anybody noticing anything unusual. Metal thieves are not unknown in Germany, but to get away with this load they would need to have used special equipment and trucks. mdr.de, 17 May 2023.

Naumburg had a crime and no witnesses, while in Düsseldorf, there were witnesses but nothing to be found after passers-by reported a man drifting in the River Rhine on 8 May. At 9.20pm police received a call saying a man had jumped from a bridge into the river; other callers said it had been two people. Police in helicopters and boats went out and searched from the air, water and on land for two hours, but found no trace of any missing person. Such sightings and ensuing searches are reported about three or four times a year in the press – are we dealing with misperception, or phantoms? rp-online.de, 9 May 2023.

Again in Germany, in early May, a hunter trying to kill a roe



deer shot at the window of a house in Hückeswagen. He was at a distance of 800 yards from the house when he mistook it for his prey. Neighbours heard the shot and alerted police, who at first suspected attempted murder. When they followed the trajectory of the bullet, they found the hunter, who thought he had shot at a wounded animal. *Kölner Stadt-Anzeiger*, 6 May 2023.

ANIMAL DEATHS

When police found a mutilated dolphin in a waste basket at Douarnenez, Brittany, France, they traced a 70-year-old man who had discovered the freshly stranded animal, cut it up and eaten it. What he couldn't eat, he threw away. *Kölner Stadt-Anzeiger*, 6 May 2023.

Animal mutilations of various kinds were reported in Germany, and not just the sad and sadly common sexual attacks on horses. In Swabia, hikers found severed horse's legs with hooves in a forest near Leutkirch. Earlier, similar disgusting discoveries had been reported in the nearby villages of Diepoldshofen and Bad Wurzach. A police investigation revealed a completely non-cruel explanation: the hooves, from a slaughterhouse, had been used in veterinary training as test objects for hoof care: but who had disposed of the unwanted legs in the forest was never ascertained. *schwäbische.de*, 6 April 2023.

At the same time in May 2023, the severed skull of a forest animal was reported to Bad Wiessee police, and an orphaned fawn that had been found close to it was handed over to the officials. There was uncertainty as to whether the finds were connected, but it was at first thought the skull belonged to the fawn's mother. This notion was rejected when it was found the skull belonged to a young red deer and had been cut off with surgical precision, the tongue being removed. Who killed the deer remains a mystery, and the



ABOVE: Farmer Lipp's Shrek maize maze was actually created in 2022.

discovery of the orphaned fawn was assumed to have been a coincidence. *www.merkur.de*, 11 June 2023.

Thousands rather than simply one dead animal turned up in the Netherlands on the beach between Nollestrand and Westduin in Zeeland on 25 June when whole shoals of fish were washed ashore dead. TV channel Hart van Nederland reported on 25 June that the fish were "probably sprats, small herring that live in large shoals... The exact cause of this sad and mysterious event has not yet been elucidated, but there are suspicions." Earlier this year, a similar mass death had been reported from Egmond aan Zee in the province of Northern Holland. "In this case, investigation revealed that the fish had probably been chased by Atlantic horse mackerel, and ended up in the shallow water and were washed up en masse on the beach," said the report. *www.ruhr24.de*, 4 July 2023.

NEW LAKE MONSTER

The northern regions, like the British Isles and Scandinavia, have no shortage of lake monsters. There is one in almost any sizeable European lake, and now, according to recent reports, another body of water can be added to the

growing list. Lake Bor, in Serbia, lies at an altitude of 438m (1,437ft) and was created as an artificial reservoir in 1959. Today, it is a resort and a well-known beauty spot. A "legend was attached to the lake, namely [that of] a kind of monster from Lake Bor. This legend has not left the inhabitants of eastern Serbia for decades. The story of a formless shadow with wings and a horse's head, which emerges from the water and frightens people, is widely spread," writes *lepotesrbije.alo.rs*. "As the legend says, it all started one evening when two young men were bathing in the lake. One of them drowned, and the other stayed to witness the monster and eventually... lost his mind. The mystical monster... also scares people who would graze their cattle there. According to the stories, cattle mysteriously disappear near Lake Bor. Locals attribute their disappearance to being swallowed up by the Serbian Loch Ness Monster. According to legend, the monster appears at night. A possible explanation for the alleged encounters with this creature is people seeing larger specimens of catfish and pike that reside in this reservoir." *breakinglatest.news*, 13 May 2023.

CROP CIRCLES

Sometimes a phenomenon suddenly and unexpectedly dies, like the Greek god Pan – or crop circles: when I checked in a dozen European languages, I got mainly news that was at least a year old. The few snippets mainly referred to large-scale artworks and just two crop circles.

Farmer Lipp in Weiterstadt near Darmstadt, Germany, had created a maize maze depicting the Disney character Shrek, his wife Fiona and his donkey. An aerial picture of it suddenly made the rounds on social media in March, but the farmer explained that it had been last year's work and had measured 40,000m². He plans his next corn maze for October 2023 with a Hallowe'en theme. *op-online.de*, 22 Mar 2023.

Toward the end of May, a circle was found in a wheat field of the community of Capriano del Colle south of Brescia in northern Italy. It measured almost 200ft (60m) in diameter and consisted of a large circle that contained a crescent shape and a smaller double circle of still standing cereal. "The farmers confirm that the figures inside were thinned out with a brush-cutter," says the local newspaper. *BresciaOggi*, 30+31 May 2023.

Then, on 21 June, another formation was discovered in a wheat field at Saint-Babel, Département Puy-de-Dôme, central France. It was made of "three embossed circles connecting to a sizable ring that contains a shape similar to a crescent Moon". Didier Archimbaud, who owns the field, said that "there is no trace of footsteps or even of a car. I don't know how this could have been achieved." The formation measured some 3,000m². Interestingly, the village boasts one of the few permanent modern geoglyphs in Continental Europe, the letters 'St Babel' in white just below the castle. *coasttocoastam.com*, 22 June 2023.

THE C NSPIRASPHERE

Was the devastating fire that left Lahaina, Maui, a smoking ruin the tragic result of criminal negligence or part of a darker conspiracy? **NOEL ROONEY** watches the vultures circling...

ASHES, ASHES

The town of Lahaina, on the island of Maui, in Hawaii, is a smoking ruin. Fire devastated the seaside community of 13,000 people, most of them (unusually for prime real estate in Hawaii) native Hawaiians. It happened suddenly, and spread preternaturally quickly. With 100 fatalities confirmed, at the time of writing 1,300 people are unaccounted for, many of them children; the community has been literally decimated by the tragedy. It is quite likely that the Lahaina fire will be the biggest such disaster in recent US history.

Surviving residents are angry at what they see as criminal negligence by the local authorities. The town had an emergency siren, usually used for tsunami warnings. It was not used, apparently, because the person in charge of it was worried that people would think it was a tsunami and run towards the fire. The town's water hydrants went dry at a crucial point, making it impossible for local people to fight the rapidly advancing flames. There were stories of police stopping people from leaving town, turning them back towards the fire.

Two broader reasons were offered for the rapid spread of the fire. The island's utility company had been warned, as far back as 2019, that their power cables needed to be cut off in case of wildfire; the cables have a propensity to snap in high winds, setting fire to the second problem: in recent years, non-native wild grasses, tall, dry grasses, have been planted to replace local flora. It appears that the local government was rather slow about managing and clearing these obvious hazards, and they are widely blamed for the speed of the fire's advance.

Perhaps the most tragic element of the whole incident concerns the town's children. When news of the approaching



Local people will be faced with a choice that's no choice

fire emerged, the local schools were closed and the children sent home. Their parents were still at work, or trying to escape the fire; probably trusting that the education authority would look after their children. When the final reckoning arrives, the number of young victims is projected to be heart-wrenchingly high.

It was a tragic picture of confusion and ineptitude in the face of a natural catastrophe. Or was it? A number of reports have surfaced suggesting that the Lahaina fire was anything but a natural disaster, or at least that bad actors seized the opportunity of the fire to push their own evil agendas. In this rendition, the fire resembles the aftermath of 9/11 more than, say, the great fire of Chicago.

Some residents reported being offered large sums of money, from unknown sources, to sell their ruined properties, often within hours of the fire. This, commentators say, is the doing of the other residents of Lahaina, few if any of whom were present when the fire started. It seems the

town is very popular with US celebrities and the super-rich; Oprah Winfrey was mentioned regularly, but the rumours are that a veritable legion of the rich has plans to push the locals out and settle among the ashes. News to veteran rocker Mick Fleetwood, who lost his restaurant in the blaze.

Large sums of money; that's a key point, according to conspiracists. Most of the residential homes in town were worth over a million dollars, largely because property speculators had driven the prices up to try and force locals into selling and making space for the aspirational rich to settle. Insurance companies are already trying to back out of full payments (2,000 houses at a million bucks a pop is quite the bill), allegedly.

So local people will be faced with a choice that's no choice; take part payment and somehow find the money to rebuild, or give in and sell to the lifestyle vultures crowding the scorched wings of the drama. The conspiracy theory, that's to say, accuses rich investors of deliberately starting the fire, or at least profiting from its devastation, so they can colonise the area and build houses that cost rather north of a mere million.

The C-sphere is also awash with theories about directed energy weapons (don't all weapons direct energy?). The

USAF has two DEW bases; one on the mainland, the other (inevitably, students of tragedy might say) on Maui. Satellite imagery on the day of the disaster shows that fires started more or less simultaneously in five separate locations (most of them nowhere near Lahaina, but why let detail spoil a good rant?).

So, in a nutshell: an elite real-estate cabal led by Oprah persuaded the USAF to use DEWs to achieve their devious dream of ethnic cleansing. The Air Force was only too happy to oblige, chuffed at the chance to test its new toys. The utility company had been paid or persuaded by the WEF to ignore the real problem and spend all its spare cash on Agenda 2030. The land management people were told to take the week off.

Someone nobbled the siren operator so they didn't sound the alarm (actually, a small majority of C-sphere commentators are happy to acknowledge that the manager was probably dumb enough to manage this catastrophe all on his own). Useful idiots got online at once to blame the fire on climate change and deflect public scrutiny from the deeper, darker desires of the rich. Interestingly, some eminent climate experts were at pains to point out that climate change did *not* play a part; the NOAA released a statement to that effect.

When the ashes settle, and the dead are counted, how will this story look? Tragedy or crime? I suspect there will be two parallel narratives, neither fully honest; and neither will help the victims of Lahaina.

www.latimes.com/world-nation/letter/2023-08-15/grim-task-of-finding-identifying-maui-fire-victims-could-take-weeks-todays-headlines; www.lewrockwell.com/2023/08/joseph-mercola/what-caused-the-deadly-maui-fires/



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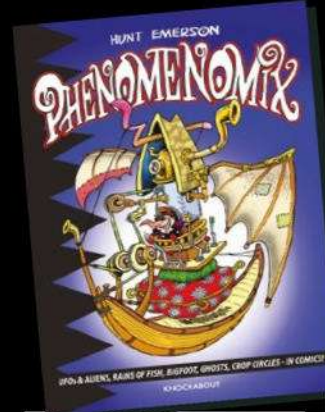


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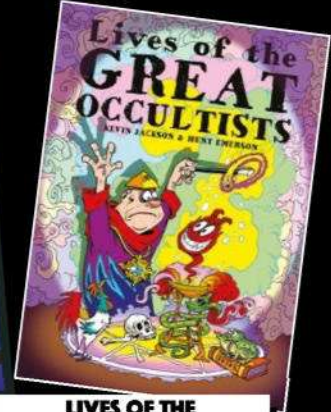
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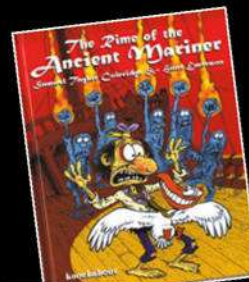
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ALIEN BIG CATS IN BRITAIN [FT433:4-5]

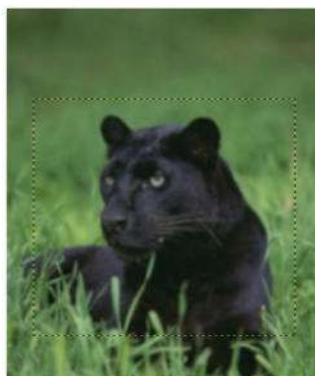


Following their claim earlier this year to have detected leopard DNA in hairs found in

Gloucestershire, the film-makers behind the *Panthera Britannia Declassified* documentary now say they have “probably the best photo of a British big cat that exists”. Producer Tim Whittard said: “This astonishing lost photograph and amazing new scientific discovery form only a fraction of the collective evidence on display in the film.”

The picture is supposed to show a black panther-like cat lying in long grass in Smallthorne, Staffordshire, but its provenance leaves a lot to be desired.

The photo was discovered by Carl Marshall, from the Centre for Fortean Zoology, when he was working in their archives. It was accompanied by a handwritten note dated 17 March, but without a year, a sender’s address, or their full name, all of which makes verifying its source immediately very difficult. Marshall says, “The photo is unambiguous, it is clearly a large cat of the *Panthera* genus, and it’s so clear we can even see its whiskers,” adding, “If it’s genuine, then it’s probably the best photo of a British big cat that exists.” In addition to the less than perfect documentation, the photo, while indeed very clear, does not show enough of the landscape to securely link it to the claimed Staffordshire location, and there has been some scepticism about whether the vegetation in which the animal is crouched even looks English. As a result, it is impossible to securely tie the picture to a date, a photographer or a location, and even to say whether it was taken in the UK. The documentary itself is more sceptical about the photo than the press coverage suggests, but



TOP LEFT: The “astonishing lost photo” of a British big cat as seen in the press. TOP RIGHT: The Allposters.com panther photo. ABOVE: Photographer Martin Belderson overlaid the two images, revealing the “lost photo” to be a fake composite image.

does not dismiss it outright.

Photographer and wildlife film maker Martin Belderson, who has made films on British big cats and on bogus UFO photos, first suspected the photo was faked because the colour profiles of the head and grass don’t match, so he attempted to track down its source using a reverse image search. He discovered that the cat comes from a poster sold by the US website Allposters (the site is no longer accessible from the UK) – called Black Panther Sitting in Grass. Belderson flipped the image and overlaid it with the new photo. He told FT: “I had to rotate the poster image 1.0 degrees clockwise to match. You can see that a lot of fuzziness has been introduced to the fake and some of the panther’s outline is lost. That’s most likely an attempt to hide the cut-out-

and-paste harsh edges of the matte. It might even have been stretched a tiny amount, but otherwise it matches”. Using software tools to overlay the images he found that: “The dead giveaways are: the whisker curving down in both images, the head position, the eyes, the ears, its back, and the blades of grass in front of the original’s chest which miraculously appear in the fake too.” So, while it is an excellent photo of a big cat, it is not an excellent photo of a big cat in Britain, and is, in fact, a deliberately created composite of two different images. Who created it, and for what purpose, remains a mystery; and why it was used to promote the documentary is unclear, as the film also presents several far more credible pieces of evidence and provides additional information that

bolsters the credibility of the previously announced DNA test. metro.co.uk, theguardian.com, 16 Aug 2023.

OLDEST CAT [FT429:13]



The record for the world’s oldest living cat held by Flossie, a 27-year-old tortoiseshell from Orpington, south

London, has been snatched by another tortoiseshell, Rosie, who was 32 on 1 June. Rosie’s owner, Lila Brissett, 72, took the cat on as a rescue kitten in 1991 when her previous owner’s daughter was found to be allergic to cats, and she has lived in Lila’s first floor flat in Norwich, Norfolk, ever since, only ever visiting the vet twice. Lila says, “She’s quite a character. She’s still got all her own teeth,” although Rosie now spends most of her

time dozing in the sunshine on a windowsill. Asked the secret of Rosie's longevity, Lila said: "You tell me! Care and attention? Good food? I don't know." *Sun*, 7 Apr 2023.

CAT SHAVER MYSTERY [FT414:4, 430:24]



After the resurgence of cat shaving incidents in Coventry and the Medway towns at the beginning of this year, the number of alleged incidents ballooned to more than 80 by the end of March. While some of the new attacks occurred close to the previous incidents, others were reported from Craigie, near Aberdeen, Scotland, Rugeley in Staffordshire, Southampton, and Littlehampton in West Sussex.

Natasha McPhee, 39, who runs the Animals Lost and Found charity in Gillingham, Kent, feared some of these were (ahem) copycat incidents and said: "I have no explanation why or who would do such a thing. Personally, I think they are sick and need to be caught as quickly as possible." She urged owners whose pets were victims of cat shaving to contact either her charity, which is keeping track of attacks, or the RSPCA. *mirror.co.uk*, 28 Mar 2023.

DRONE SWARMS [FT416:18-19]



It seems that it is not just the US Navy that is being troubled by anomalous and untraceable "drone swarms". Since January 2020, military air combat training ranges in Arizona have been beset by small unidentified "objects", sometimes in swarms of up to eight. They have been recorded as flying at altitudes of up to 36,000ft (11,000m) and travelling as fast as Mach 0.75 (556mph), way beyond the capabilities of any known unmanned aircraft system (UAS), which rarely fly above 500ft (152m) or faster than 52mph (84kph).

Reports made to the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA)

from military pilots include one from 29 March 2021 in which two pilots flying F-35s in the vicinity of Buckeye, Arizona, described seeing "3 to 4 UAS off [the] right side while e[ast] bound at 17,000 feet", while a few days later on 25 March, pilots in a pair of F-35s flying near Casa Grande, Arizona, between Phoenix and Tucson, "reported a large white UAS... at FL240 [24,000ft]". According to the FAA logs, "the object, which appeared to be stationary, was described as a small GA [general aviation] aircraft or a very large UAS". On 22 April 2022, another F-35 pilot reported "8 silver UAS [at an altitude of] between 16,000 and 20,000 feet" in the vicinity of Glendale, Arizona, and there are many other similar reports.

Some of the objects seem to be something other than drones; on 14 December 2022, the pilot of a 56th Fighter Wing F-35 on a training sortie made a report about a "small metallic object". The pilot first "observed [a] radar significant object at FL210 [21,000ft]" and then "visually identified [it]... as a small, black, and metallic object"; and on 19 January 2023, an F-16 Viper fighter jet from an unknown unit actually collided in mid-air with "an orange-white UAS" which damaged its cockpit canopy. Prior to these reports, in 2016, a police helicopter in nearby Tucson encountered a mysteriously capable and unidentifiable drone, while five years later, a US Customs and Border Protection helicopter was involved in an incident with a similarly puzzling craft in the same area.

As far as can be told from the information acquired by *The War Zone* website, the US military still has no idea what these UAS are, nor who might be operating them. Aviation intelligence researchers Joseph Trevithick and Tyler Rogoway say: "The adversary surveillance possibilities are very concerning, but clearly there are multiple potential explanations as to the wide array of objects that pilots are spotting where they shouldn't be spotting any at all." *thedrive.com/the-war-zone*, 2 Aug 2023.

MYTHCONCEPTIONS

by Mat Coward

272: FALLING UPWARDS



ILLUSTRATIONS BY HUNT EMERSON

The myth

When the parachute opens, the parachutist is jerked up into the air.

The "truth"

Everyone's seen this happen – but only on screen, not in life. The reason is simple: it's an optical illusion, which only becomes apparent when the jump is being filmed. At the moment that the skydiver's chute opens, the rate at which they are falling slows significantly. But unless the person filming them has coordinated their chute opening to the split second to match that of the jumper, the camera continues to fall at the same rate as before. So, in that instant, the camera is falling faster than the person it's filming, and therefore falling past them, downwards, which makes the filmed jumper seem momentarily to ascend towards and sometimes through the top of the frame. The laws of gravity are pretty firm on this: when you jump out of an aeroplane, you go downwards, not upwards.

Sources

www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/guides/zxxxds/revision/6; www.skydivecoastalcarolinas.com/blog/skydiving-myths-revealed; www.dontbelievethat.com/skydivers-shoot-upward-when-their-parachute-opens-myth

Disclaimer

Having never jumped out of anything higher than a bed, and that only reluctantly, this column is open to any alternative theories which readers might wish to float on the letters page.

Mythchaser

While we're on the subject of masochistic pleasures, does the exercise mantra of "no pain, no gain" have any science behind it, or is it the self-evident absurdity that it sounds like? You wouldn't apply the same logic to a machine – that overworking it improves its performance – and it seems instinctively obvious that any pain you feel while exercising is a signal that you should do less. But is there a legitimate reason for thinking that if it doesn't hurt, it's not worth doing?



NECROLOG

This month, a legendary Yeti and Bigfoot hunter who mounted expeditions with the likes of Tom Slick and John Green sets out on the great trail in the sky

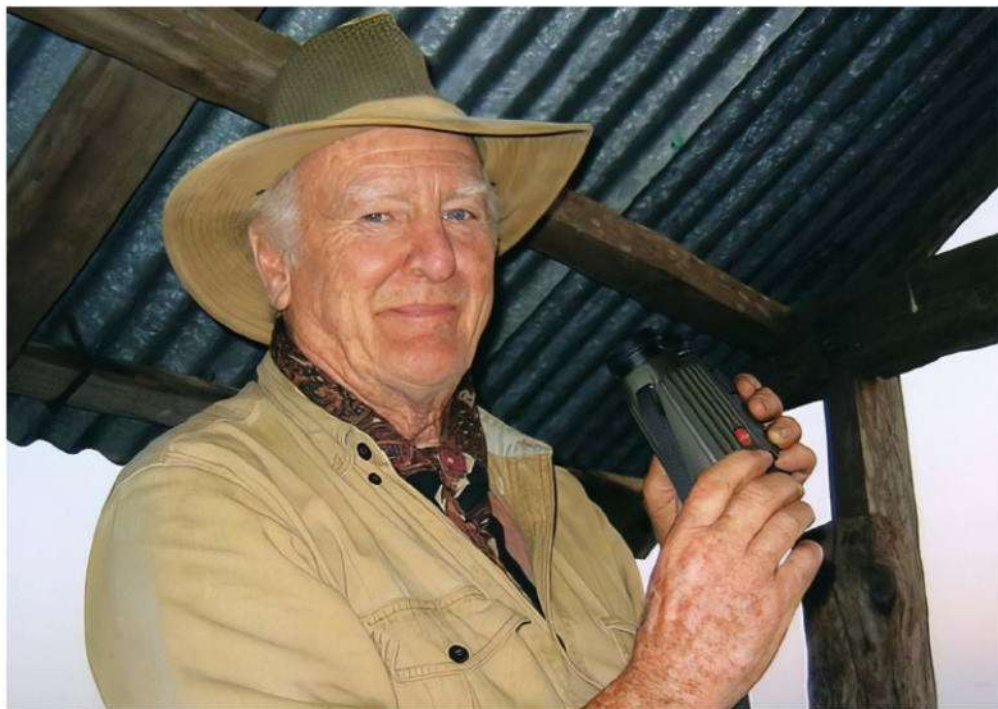
PETER C BYRNE

The Abominable Snowmen and Bigfoot hunter Peter C Byrne has died at the age of 97. He lived a long and dedicated life in pursuit of cryptozoological subjects and achieved what few could imagine, routinely finding sponsorships for his searches for the Yeti and North American Sasquatch, for almost six decades.

Peter Cyril Byrne was born in Dublin, Ireland, to an Irish father and an English mother. His father owned a 300-acre Irish farm where Peter grew up hunting and fishing. After leaving school in 1943, Byrne served in the Royal Air Force in World War II, piloting rescue boats in the South Asian theatre, earning personal honours and three campaign medals. After his service, Byrne worked on a tea plantation in northern India and later opened Nepal's first tiger hunting concession (at the end of his life, he helped protect them).

In 1956, while on a trek to Zongri, Sikkim, he heard tales about the Abominable Snowman or Yeti which made him determined to search for the mysterious creature. On a later trek into Sikkim, Byrne met Tenzing Norgay, who conquered Everest with Sir Edmund Hillary, and they became friends. Tenzing told Peter something that would shape his life for decades. Amazingly, and fortuitously, Tenzing had met an American who was wandering in search of the Yeti. This turned out to be the Texas oil and beef millionaire Tom Slick (FT414:52-53), whom Byrne then contacted.

In 1957, Slick agreed to Byrne's proposal for a Yeti expedition and arrived in Nepal for a one-month reconnaissance with him. After a month of hiking, Slick returned to the oil fields of Oklahoma and Texas, but continued to fund Byrne's



long expeditions in 1958 and 1959 in search of the Yeti. Those years unhappily resulted in no photographs or body of a Yeti; by the end of the 1950s, Byrne's three-year mission to hunt and track down the Yeti came to an end.

However, the Slick-Johnson expeditions, of which Byrne was a member, found footprints and a mummified hand in Pangboche monastery. Byrne took a finger from the Pangboche hand and replaced it with a human finger; the finger was tested and found to be somewhere between human, gorilla and chimpanzee, but it was later supposedly lost. When it was found again, DNA analysis by zoologist Dr Rob Ogden, announced in 2011 on a programme entitled *Yeti Finger* on BBC Radio 4, revealed that the finger was of human origin. Later, Bryan Sykes (FT308:9, 320:21, 324:21, 326:21, 403:28-29) tackled the riddle of "The Pangboche Finger," in his book, *The Nature of the Beast*, and the results he found were startling

and shocking. He found that Ogden's "human" DNA included "a European mitochondrial DNA sequence, in the clan of Ursula". The notion that the "human" of the Pangboche finger might be from a monk had to be thrown out. Indeed, Sykes wrote, "The Pangboche Finger sequence was almost certainly not from Nepal or anywhere else close by..." and figured out who was the most likely candidate to have left his DNA on the finger, which he compared to "cheek swab DNA" he had collected. It turns out the DNA exactly matched that of Peter Byrne.

During his Yeti hunting years, Peter Byrne also appeared to have had a "hiding in plain sight" involvement with the CIA. As I noted in my Tom Slick book and elsewhere, the Yeti expeditions of Tom Slick and Peter Byrne allegedly were covers for CIA activity and there were rumours circulating that Slick and Byrne were responsible, in some fashion, for the safe passage of the Dalai

Lama from Lhasa to India.

In the 1960s, the hunt shifted from Nepal to the Pacific Northwest where Slick put Byrne in charge of a "Pacific Northwest Bigfoot Expedition", which, for a short time, included Byrne and fellow Bigfoot legends Rene Dahinden, John Green and Bob Titmus. Relations among the team were fractious though, and little was achieved by the time Slick was killed in a plane crash in 1962 and funding ceased. Byrne returned to the Bigfoot hunt in 1971, with funding from Ohio millionaire Tom Page (1928-2020) and the Boston Academy of Applied Sciences, enabling him to establish the Bigfoot Information Center near The Dalles, Oregon. In 1976, Byrne wrote *The Search for Bigfoot: Monster, Myth, or Man?* but left the hunt again in 1979. A dozen years later, he came back, promoting a no-kill position, when he got new funding from New Hampshire millionaire Robert Rines (1922-2009). Byrne directed the Bigfoot



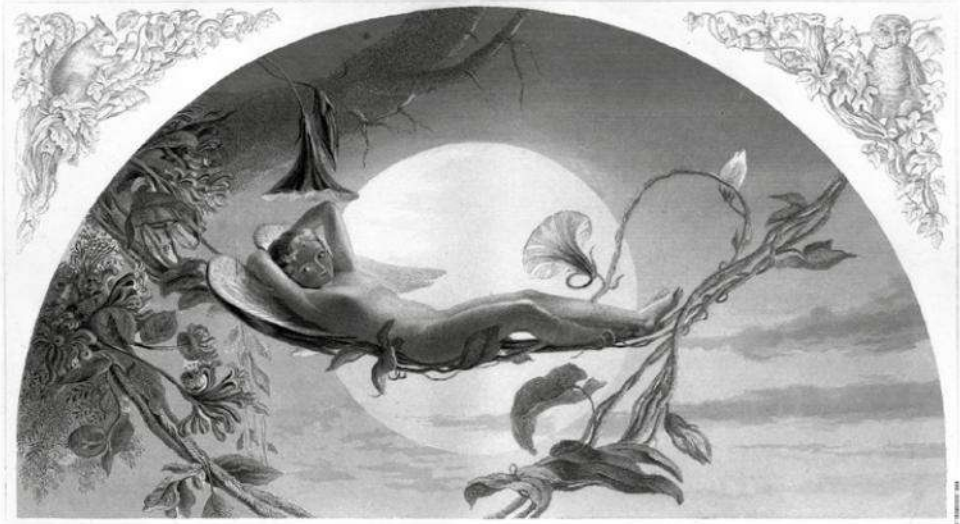
Research Project from 1992 based near Parkdale, Oregon, in the Hood River region. This was a full-scale monster search, complete with helicopters, infrared sensors and 1-800-BIGFOOT phone number. Byrne's efforts, which continued until around 1997, did not produce much in the way of good evidence, but he gave it a good shot. After this project, Byrne was commissioned to investigate sightings of a Bigfoot-type creature in southern Florida, the Skunk Ape (FT145:6).

In between projects, Byrne, wearing his trademark ascot, would make a career out of appearing regularly in television documentaries about Bigfoot. In the documentary *Sasquatch Odyssey*, Peter Byrne told of having used "three million dollars of other people's money" to search for Yeti and Bigfoot during the course of his life. After 1997, he went into semi-retirement from the Bigfoot field, although he continued his tourist/adventure work around the world and would often make appearances at Bigfoot gatherings. Towards the end of his life, in the early 2000s, Byrne retired to a modest home on a salmon-filled river near Pacific City, Oregon. His later years, though, were blighted by legal and financial troubles and a 2019 controversy over a story from his Bigfoot days relating to the FBI analysis of an alleged Bigfoot hair sample, which turned out to be moose hair.

I knew Peter, talked to him for years, got to spend more than three intense days interviewing him in 1988 for my Tom Slick book, saw him distance himself from me and many others, get in fights with some of the old-timers, and then apologise to me late in his life. I never bore Peter any ill will and understood that's what happens in this field. May he rest in peace and find happiness in the hereafter.

Peter Cyril Byrne, Yeti and Bigfoot hunter; born Dublin, Ireland, 22 Aug 1925; died Pacific City, Oregon, 28 July 2023, aged 97.

Loren Coleman



FAIRIES, FOLKLORE AND FORTEANA

SIMON YOUNG FILES A NEW REPORT FROM THE INTERFACE OF STRANGE PHENOMENA AND FOLK BELIEF

HOOVES IN THE NIGHT

Horse spirits are some of the least studied of British animal presences: they receive far less attention from fortune tellers and folklorists than their cousins the black dogs. But as late as the 1800s various parts of the island had their horse bogies. There were kelpies in Scotland, brags in Northumberland and County Durham, shag foals from the Humber to Peterborough. In Dorset, West Hampshire, south Somerset and Wiltshire, meanwhile, there were colt pixies. These were all shape-changing equine tricksters and among their tricks a favourite was to tempt a passer-by onto their back and then dunk or drown the rider in a nearby pond.

The horse spirit barely survived motorisation. In 1890 there was one horse for every eleven Britons: the horse was by far Britain's most important animal, fundamental in transport, defence, farming and hunting. Today there is one horse for every 70 Britons: and the animal has more to do with ceremony and recreation than work. Its place in the national imagination has suffered.

One of the horse spirit's tricks was what might be called the 'invisible gallop'. A night walker heard a horse(s) rushing by, but on looking around nothing was actually there. For instance, "a troop of invisible horses were often heard galloping, at dead of night, towards the Ridge House" near Burnley.

The Humbleknowe Brag used to wait until nightfall and then create a noise outside "as if all the horses and cattle about the place had broken loose, and were running a-muck at each other": when the farmer walked outside, the noise stopped. At Troedyrhiw-Trwyn in Wales, "Several local observers swear that they have heard hoofbeats pounding along

the old cart track, but no one has ever traced the source of the sound to any visible phenomenon."

This is extremely common forteana in the 1800s, and we stress that the horse is not seen. But, winningly, the invisible gallop seems (unlike pond dunking) to have survived the arrival of the car: "The sound of horse's hooves in the night is perplexing residents of six flats in a remote country house at Bentley Heath, Solihull" (1963). In 1968 a horse in Ascot (where else?) did things

in style and galloped invisibly at night down a hotel corridor! I also heard of a recent case from the South Pennines of unseen horses going by after dark. I'd love to hear of any other experiences. What is the explanation? It is worth remembering that our sense of hearing is exaggerated in the darkness when we cannot rely on our eyes. There are also (I find them weak) attempts to explain the invisible galloping with reference to the wind bringing the noise from elsewhere.

Simon Young is the author of *The Boggart* (University of Exeter Press, 2022).

A FAVOURITE
TRICK WAS TO
TEMPT A PASSER-
BY ONTO THEIR
BACKS AND THEN
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IN A POND



UFOs over the Capitol

NIGEL WATSON offers his assessment of July's headline-grabbing Congressional hearing on UAPs

There were high hopes and much excitement in some quarters that the floodgates of UFO disclosure would be opened at a Congressional hearing titled 'Unidentified Anomalous Phenomena: Implications on National Security, Public Safety, and Government Transparency' convened by the House Oversight and Accountability Subcommittee on National Security, the Border, and Foreign Affairs held on 26 July 2023.

Was this going to prove a landmark moment in UFO history?

Chairperson Rep. Glenn Grothman started proceedings by saying that this was a bipartisan meeting that sought transparency and accountability and would be driven by the data.

The three witnesses putting forward the 'data' were David Grusch, former National Reconnaissance Office Representative on the UAP Task Force, Department of Defense, David Fravor, Retired Commander, Black Aces Squadron, US Navy, and Ryan Graves, former US Navy pilot and Executive Director of Americans for Safe Aerospace.

GREY CUBES AND TIC TACS

Ryan Graves recounted that in 2014, just after a radar system upgrade, he and other pilots in a Navy Fighter/Attack Squadron made up of F/A-18F Super Hornets frequently detected unknown objects that "surpassed our understanding and technology" (FT406:39). They ruled out software glitches because their infrared sensors also detected them, "confirming their physical presence". Such sightings were "an open secret among our aircrew" and so common that they were "seen" by the squadron on virtually a daily basis. Graves said that an unnamed pilot operating near Virginia Beach during an air combat training mission saw "a dark grey cube inside of a clear sphere, motionless against the wind," causing him to terminate the mission.

Making the point that UAP sightings of objects are grossly underreported by pilots, due to the stigma associated with the subject and the fear of professional repercussions, Graves bemoaned the fact that: "The Government knows more about UAP than shared publicly, and excessive classification practices keep crucial information hidden. There's a lack of transparency around UAP that's unsettling. Since 2021, all UAP videos are classified as secret or above. This level of secrecy not only impedes our understanding but fuels



BRENDAN SMIALOWSKI / AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

ABOVE: Ryan Graves, David Grusch and David Fravor are sworn in. LEFT: One of the 'Tic Tac' videos.



Graves said a pilot saw "a dark grey cube inside of a clear sphere, motionless against the wind"

speculation and mistrust." ¹

Citing the Chinese spy balloon scare and the Government's lack of transparency, Graves said that the American people deserved answers: "The bottom line is, why are we allowing objects in our sky, particularly objects displaying advanced technology, to go unidentified? I believe we should pursue these questions about the nature of UAP with a scientific method and an open mind."

David Fravor told the hearing about his famous encounter with a small white Tic Tac shaped object over the ocean when he was

flying from the *USS Nimitz* aircraft carrier in 2004 (FT363:28-29, 366:28, 403:40-47). He said: "There were no Rotors, no Rotor wash, or any visible flight control surfaces like wings." It travelled away so fast that according to Fravor it "was far superior in performance to my brand new F/A-18F" jet fighter and did not operate with any of the known aerodynamic principles that we expect for objects that fly in our atmosphere."

Fravor indicated that the Tic Tac was apparently an extraterrestrial craft: "What concerns me is that there is no 'Oversight' from our elected officials on anything associated with our Government possessing or working on craft that we believe are not from this world." ²

DOWN THE ET RABBIT HOLE

Sandwiched between those two veteran whistleblowers was newcomer to the scene, former intelligence officer David Grusch, who took us further down the alien rabbit hole. Grusch boldly stated: "It is my hope that the revelations we unearth through investigations of the Non-Human Reverse Engineering Programs I have reported will act as an ontological (earth shattering) shock, a catalyst for a global reassessment of our priorities. As we move forward on this path, we might be poised to enable extraordinary technological progress in a future where our civilization surpasses the current state-of-the-art in propulsion,

material science, energy production and storage.”

Regarding the recovery of alien bodies or craft, which he has spoken of previously (see **FT434:28-29**), Grusch said, “I have to be careful describing what I have seen,” conceding that “I’ve not witnessed bodies myself.” Nonetheless, he asserted that “biologics came with some of these recoveries” and that those involved in the multi-decade retrieval programme told him they were of a “non-human” origin. When asked about where he thought UAPs come from, Grusch claimed they emerge from a different dimension from ours using the holographic principle derived from general relativity and quantum physics.

On the question of whether UAPs are hostile, he said, “I can’t get into specifics,” but claimed that they could cause physical injury. Grusch’s knowledge of the danger posed by UFOs seems to derive from the numerous Defense Information Research Documents (DIRDs) about ‘weird science’ produced by Bigelow Aerospace Advanced Space Studies (BAASS) to study “advanced aerospace weapon threats from the present out to 40 years in the future.”³ (**FT363:28**)

One of the documents was a report entitled ‘Anomalous Acute And Subacute Field Effects on Human and Biological Tissues’ by Dr Christopher ‘Kit’ Green, who worked on the remote viewing Project Star Gate and other paranormal projects for the CIA. In the report, Green outlines, and speculates about, injuries caused by “anomalous advanced aerospace systems” (**FT420:27, 30**). This report was based on a very weak database originally compiled by the US civilian UFO group the Mutual UFO Network. Even Green admitted: “I didn’t think any of the stories were necessarily valid.”

The description given by Grusch of UAP propulsion abilities sounds as if it was directly quoted from a DIRD paper entitled ‘Quantum Tomography of Negative Energy States in the Vacuum’ that begins:

“Future aerospace vehicles could have an advanced propulsion system that uses negative quantum vacuum energy to modify the spacetime geometry in the immediate vicinity surrounding the vehicle in order to induce faster-than-light motion via traversable wormholes or warp drives, or even levitation via antigravity. These exotic propulsion concepts are well-known in mainstream general relativity and quantum field theory research.”

In previous public statements Grusch claimed that UFO whistleblowers have been murdered. He did not repeat that allegation at this hearing, but said that several of his colleagues had been physically injured by others in the US Government for addressing the UAP issue. Not going into any detail, he said that on several occasions he had feared for his life and he had suffered “active, planned reprisal activity against myself... from certain senior leadership at previous agencies I was associated with,” which he described as “administrative terrorism”.⁴

EVIDENTIAL IMPASSE

Sean Kirkpatrick, director of the Pentagon’s All-domain Anomaly Resolution Office (AARO), was quick to respond to Grusch’s statements, which were taken under oath. Writing in a personal capacity on his LinkedIn page, he stated: “I cannot let yesterday’s hearing pass without sharing how insulting it was to the officers of the Department of Defense and Intelligence Community who chose to join AARO, many with not unreasonable anxieties about the career risks this would entail.”

Kirkpatrick mentions a “central source” that seems to be a diplomatic way of referring to Grusch: “Yet, contrary to assertions made in the hearing, the central source of those allegations has refused to speak with AARO. Furthermore, some information reportedly provided to Congress has not been provided to AARO, raising additional questions about the true

commitment to transparency by some Congressional elements.”

He concludes by stating: “To be clear, AARO has yet to find any credible evidence to support the allegations of any reverse engineering program for non-human technology.”⁵

UFO Sweden obtained a statement from Sue Gough, the Department of Defense spokesperson: “The Department is aware of Dr Kirkpatrick’s post, which are his personal opinions expressed in his capacity as a private citizen and we won’t comment directly on the contents of the post.”

She goes on to say that AARO is happy “to speak with any former or current Government employee or contractor who believes they have information relevant to the congressionally-mandated historical review. Furthermore, AARO has no evidence of anyone who has supplied information being harmed or killed, and they have no knowledge of programs related to the recovery of extraterrestrial materials or any efforts to reverse-engineer them.”⁶

It does seem strange that a hearing that claimed to be seeking data-driven transparency about UAPs did not consult AARO. UFO commentator Jason Caolavito is cynical about their motives, and thinks that “Congress and ufologists are working together to legitimise old hoaxes from the 1940s about crashed saucers.”⁷ In a Q&A, Joshua Semeter, who is a member of NASA’s Unidentified Anomalous Phenomena Study Team and the director of the Center for Space Physics at Boston University, admitted that while the testimony of David Grusch and the two military aviators must be treated as credible, a major problem remained: “But without data or material evidence, we are at an impasse on evaluating these claims.”⁸

DISCLOSURE DISAPPOINTMENT

Widespread disappointment at the lack of any new or convincing evidence emerging has meant some eager disclosure



ABOVE: Graves, Grusch and Fravor take questions from members of the Subcommittee.



UFO FILES / SPECIAL REPORT

BRENDAN SMIALOWSKI / AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES



LEFT: David Grusch, former National Reconnaissance Officer Representative on the UAP Task Force, gives his testimony. **BELOW:** Professor Luke Herrington offered a sceptical take on the hearing.

supporters are now beginning to backtrack or reassess the situation. Senator Kirsten Gillibrand, for example, who helped bring about the formation of AARO, in an interview with *City&State* newspaper, said that in relation to the testimony of the two pilots, it could be that terrestrial UAPs might be involved and that AARO needs to determine whether they are sent by adversaries who are spying on the US. As for Grusch's testimony she said:

"I have no ability to verify that testimony because we've not been told of any such programs. We've asked for all information related to all programs and have not been given that detail. One of three things are true: Either it doesn't exist and they worked on programs that were alien-related which weren't, or they are making it up, or these programs do exist and the Department of Defense is not either read in on it, or the need to know is so small that the people that have been testifying in front of us don't know about it, or they are just misrepresenting the facts."⁹

That certainly seems to cover all the bases! The darling of the disclosure movement, Luis Elizondo, even went so far as to say that "the phenomenon" *itself* is upset by the prospect of UAP secret activities being made public and has decided to cancel disclosure.¹⁰

Andy Roberts, veteran commentator on the UFO scene and no stranger to these pages, noted: "I don't see what all the fuss is about... these are just unsubstantiated friend-of-a-friend stories sustained by the vast undertow of hardcore belief in 'aliens'. How do they differ from any of the other stories over the years such as Lear, MJ-12 and the rest? People in high places/authority are just as stupid as everyone else when it comes to belief... As John Keel perceptively said, 'Belief is the enemy'."

According to Herrington we should be sceptical of cases like this and their securitisation



Even Captain Kirk himself, *Star Trek* legend William Shatner, was unimpressed, calling the hearing "ridiculous".¹¹

UAP CHAFF

Luke M Herrington is an Adjunct Professor of Political Science at Park University in Parkville, Missouri, and makes a detailed case against what he calls the recent public and political frenzy over UFOs.

The first point he makes is that if we look at historical cases, UFO misidentifications can be a common problem in complex operating environments. Secondly, such misidentifications, of either friendly or hostile UFOs/UAPs, especially in the fog of war, can lead to expensive and fatal accidents: look what happened to Air Force pilot Thomas Mantell, who died chasing a secret Skyhook balloon (**FT29:43, 64:35,**

59). These two factors indicate that there has to be consistent collaboration and clear communication between all the parties involved to avoid such tragedies.

Herrington notes that the national security community has accepted the uncritical *securitisation* (some would call it weaponisation) of UAP/UFOs. Meaning that the supposed hostile incursion of UAPs into American airspace has elevated such sensational reports to the level "of more important issues like terrorism, climate change, and the coronavirus pandemic".

He underlines these points by looking at the *USS Nimitz* incident, which took place in the Southern California Offshore Range (SCORE) Complex. This range is used by the Department of Energy Advanced Research Projects Agency as a mine-testing area, a location for parachute drop zones and several radar and sonar monitoring sites. Significantly, NASA (the National Aeronautics and Space Administration) used the SCORE complex to test an X-43 hypersonic drone on 16 November 2004. That was only two days after Favor's sighting of a Tic Tac UAP. In addition, the *USS Louisville* submarine attached to the *Nimitz* battle group was carrying out weapons tests in the area.

The anomalous radar returns that instigated Favor's encounter are explained by Herrington as either caused by the reflection of ice crystals or by the Taurid meteor shower that peaked on 12 November. The Aegis SPY-1 radar system that detected these objects is not entirely infallible and has on rare occasions failed to identify aircraft; plus we have to factor in the radar operators' overconfidence in, or misinterpretation of, the available information leading to misidentification and the sending out of the Black Aces to investigate.

According to Herrington, we should be sceptical of cases like this and their securitisation, as they represent an infiltration of pseudoscience and conspiracy theory into the halls of American Government by former agents who hide behind their security clearances to avoid scrutiny and uncomfortable questions (we know who they are). It also opens the door to defence contractors to obtain funding for superfluous UAP research programmes (naming no names). After all, the February 2023 shooting down of the Chinese spy balloon off the coast of South Carolina, was a case of a very low-tech intrusion into American airspace and not the product of a Chinese hypersonic drone programme.

As a consequence, says Herrington, we should be wary of UAP securitisation,



ABOVE: People queue to attend the House Subcommittee hearing; it would seem that there is currently widespread public interest in the subject of UFOs/UAPs in the US.

as it undermines critical thinking in an operational environment and could cause a deterioration in foreign relations and/or promote an arms race. He concludes that we have “to cut through the chaff of conspiracy theory” to avoid dangerous outcomes on a national and worldwide level.¹²

UAP WHEAT?

Since 2020, swarms of up to eight drone-like objects travelling at speeds of 0.75 Mach at altitudes as high as 36,000 feet (10,970m) have been reported to the US Federal Aviation Administration. They all occurred in and around military air combat training ranges in Arizona, and included one incident that involved one of these UAPs hitting the canopy of an F-16 Viper multirole fighter jet (see p.25).¹³

Using the massive Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) database of unmanned aircraft system (UAS) and UAP reports, *The Drive* website has produced an application that allows you to search and explore this dataset, to show the scale and seriousness of these sightings.¹⁴ Some of them might be of civilian drones, but that seems an unlikely explanation for many of these incidents, and keeps alive the thought that perhaps not all UAPs are what Herrington would dismiss as just “chaff”.

Saucer Smears

Commenting on the hearing, a triumvirate of sceptical ufologists – VJ Ballester Olmos, Chris Aubeck and Julio Plaza del Olmo – called it ill-designed, redundant and ineffective. They note that the lawmakers uncritically allowed Grusch to make questionable, problematic and

grandiose declarations based on hearsay. The consequence, in their opinion, is that this session “has merely amplified a set of extravagantly dubious claims. Claims that AARO must now meticulously dissect and disprove.”

In the end, they remain both sceptical and philosophical about the hearing, noting that this was “a seemingly pyrrhic victory by Grusch and the UAP lobby, who’ve momentarily secured a potent platform for such baseless testimonies. But time puts everyone in their place.”¹⁵

As a final twist to the story, Grusch’s character has been called into question by *The Intercept* website, which uncovered police records showing that in 2014 and 2018 he had episodes of being drunk, angry and suicidal. Grusch admits he has suffered from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and he believes that by leaking these documents the US Government is trying to smear him to discredit his claims. In its defence, *The Debrief* noted that it consulted publicly available documents that were *not* leaked by the intelligence community and were surprised that Grusch had been able to keep his security clearance.

Nonetheless, it makes the sceptics and critics look as though they are desperate to shut him up and is more likely to make Grusch a martyr to the disclosure cause.¹⁶

This hearing and other UAP research initiatives have certainly pushed at the gates of disclosure, but much to the frustration of both believers and sceptics it is proving hard to get any firm evidence for any of these revelations. We can certainly expect further twists and turns in a ufological saga that would have put a smile on Fort’s face.

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NANDOR FODOR & THE TALKING MONGOOSE

As the strange case of Gef the Talking Mongoose finds a wider audience in a new film starring Simon Pegg and Minnie Driver, **CHRIS JOSIFFE** recalls the visit of Hungarian paranormal investigator Nandor Fodor to the Isle of Man in search of the mystifying 'man-weasel'.

Throughout the 1930s, the world's newspapers were full of incredible stories about Gef, a 'talking mongoose' or 'man-weasel' who had allegedly appeared in the home of a peculiar family living in a somewhat dilapidated Isle of Man farmhouse. Gef was said to speak several languages, sing, steal objects from nearby farms, and eavesdrop on local people, bearing local gossip back to his host family, James and Margaret Irving and their teenage daughter Voirrey.

James and Margaret were not native Islanders, but had moved there from Liverpool in 1917, where, up until the Great War, they had enjoyed comparative prosperity. James, an educated and intellectually curious man, had been Britain's sales representative for the Dominion Piano & Organ Company, a Canadian firm whose grand and upright pianos were renowned for their high quality and exported worldwide.

However, in September 1915 Parliament passed the 'McKenna Tariff', a tax intended to save shipping cargo space for essential goods. It applied a 33 per cent import duty on what were seen as luxury items like cars, clocks, and musical instruments, thus bringing James's thriving piano dealership to an end. After a failed attempt to set up an engineering business and some property speculation, he decided on a dramatic career change. Despite having no farming experience, in November 1916 James used his savings to purchase Doarlish Cashen, a semi-derelict farmhouse on the Isle of Man. It consisted of two floors, with a parlour, sitting room and pantry on the ground floor, two upstairs bedrooms, and 70 acres of farmland.

Situated in Kirk Patrick, a parish in the Island's remote south-west where older people still spoke the Manx language, and where traditional folk beliefs in ghosts, fairies and other supernatural beings were still prevalent, the farm was 725 feet (221m) above sea level and half-way up Dalby Mountain.



LEFT: Hungarian psychoanalyst, lawyer, journalist and paranormal investigator Nandor Fodor came to the Isle of Man in 1937 to try and solve the Gef mystery.

porary) tourists. But Glen Maye waterfall is also renowned for its *Buggane*, a terrifying ogre-like creature with claws, tusks, red eyes and thick black hair. Associated with water, these spirits are intelligent and occasionally speak to humans. Sometimes employed by the fairies to punish humans who have incurred the Good People's wrath, *Bugganes* are shape-shifters, typically adopting the form of a cow or a horse, but sometimes that of a cat or other animal.

A mile north of Glen Maye one finds Gordon village, where, according to local legend, a *phynnodderee* had once lived with the Radcliffe family, assisting them on their farm by threshing and bringing in the hay. A *phynnodderee* is the Manx version of a hob or brownie, a mischievous, temperamental but helpful fairy. They can be very useful, owing to their great strength and appetite for hard work, but are sensitive and easily offended, so must be treated with respect as well as rewarded with food and drink.

Before the Irvings could begin living in Doarlish Cashen, a good deal of renovation work had to be undertaken, including the installation of wooden panelling over the interior stone walls to act as insulation against the cold. Two local men were engaged, but had refused to stay overnight, preferring to make the six-mile journey on foot back to their homes in Peel. "Look here," one had said. "I cannot sleep in that room; I have heard strange noises, and there is something uncanny about the place." There was a four-inch aperture between the wooden panelling and the walls themselves, a gap sufficient for a small animal to run around the house at will.



**GEF HAD WARNED
THE IRVINGS: "I SHALL
HAUNT YOU WITH
WEIRD NOISES"**

Its nearest roads or houses were in the villages of Dalby and Glen Maye, both of which were an arduous half-hour climb away. Glen Maye is famed for its waterfall, a local beauty spot attractive to Victorian (and contem-



ABOVE LEFT: Doarlish Cashen, the Irving family's remote farmhouse on the Isle of Man, with Jim Irving and his daughter Voirrey at the front door. **ABOVE RIGHT:** In the 1930s, the 'Man-Weasel' mystery quickly spread from local newspapers on the island to the national press. **BELOW:** Voirrey Irving leaves out some food for Gef.

"A GHOST IN THE FORM OF A WEASEL"

Initially, James Irving was able to hire local labour, entrusting the farm's day-to-day management to his son Gilbert, 16 years old in 1917, and his elder daughter Elsie (born in 1897) also helped. Towards the end of the Great War, the farm was well stocked with livestock and in good order. However, as produce prices fell and farm workers migrated to the towns, profits fell while the cost of hired labour became prohibitive. In 1928, Gilbert, tiring of the lonely farm's arduous work, departed for London. Elsie returned to Liverpool in 1929.

Irving was now solely reliant on himself, his wife, and his younger daughter Voirrey (born in 1918) to run the farm, now reduced to 45 acres, mainly gorse and scrub, with 30 sheep, six goats and a few hens, ducks and geese. In autumn 1931, when Gef, the mysterious 'talking mongoose' first appeared, James was 58. His wife Margaret was 54, and Voirrey was 13, all living in abject poverty in the gloomy farmhouse with no electric lighting, no radio and no telephone.

Such were the family's straitened circumstances when, in September 1931, they first began to hear "strange sounds behind the wainscoting of the house", as James explained to a journalist. "In October I and my daughter caught the first glimpse of the beast. It was a little animal resembling a stoat, a ferret, or a weasel, yellow in colour with a body about nine inches long... It appears in the house from time to time..." Margaret Irving described him as "a cross between a rat and a weasel and a stoat, with a long bushy tail and a flat face like a pig."

James told the journalist how he had unsuc-

cessfully attempted to trap the creature, who he initially called 'Jack'. "In about November we first heard a strange voice coming from behind the woodwork singing sentences of songs and hymns..." When questioned, 'Jack' had warned the Irvings: "*I am a ghost in the form of a weasel, and I shall haunt you with weird noises and clanking chains.*" He also told them he was "*an earthbound spirit*". But not long afterwards, he expressed a preference for the name 'Geoff' (spelt phonetically as 'G - E - F'), and confirmed that rather than a weasel, he was "*just a little extra, extra clever mongoose*".

ENTER NANDOR FODOR

It's entirely appropriate that Nandor Fodor's investigation of the Isle of Man's elusive Gef be foregrounded in the plot and title of the newly-released *Nandor Fodor and the Talking Mongoose* (written and directed by Adam Sigal, and starring Simon Pegg, Minnie Driver, and Christopher Lloyd, with Neil Gaiman as the voice of Gef).

Harry Price is more widely associated with Gef, in part because of his 1936 book about the case, *The Haunting of Cashen's Gap*, co-written with *Listener* editor Rex Lambert; and in part due to Price's fame and talent for self-promotion. However, his investigation was restricted to receiving on-the-spot reports from one of his researchers, Captain Harold Dennis, who was sent by Price to the island. Eventually, Price and Lambert did visit, but

only for a two-night stay at the Waterfall Inn in Glen Maye village, a steep one-mile trek up Dalby Mountain to Doarlish Cashen, the remote farmhouse owned by the Irving family, where Gef was said to have manifested some three years before.

Perhaps Price would have stayed longer had Gef made an appearance, or even uttered a few words, but the temperamental entity had taken a dislike to him. "*I like Captain Dennis,*" Gef told James Irving, "*But not Harry Price! He's the man who puts the kybosh on the spirits!*"

By contrast, Nandor Fodor, a Hungarian psychoanalyst, lawyer and journalist as well as paranormal investigator, stayed with the Irving family for an entire week in February 1937. During this time, he undertook a thorough investigation, interviewing not just all three members of the Irving family, but numerous local people, several of whom claimed to have heard or even seen the elusive little creature.

Born in Berengszasz, Hungary, in 1895 to a Jewish family, Fodor studied law and worked as a journalist, leaving Budapest for the USA in 1921. After the collapse of the short-lived Soviet Republic (and its accompanying Red Terror) in 1919, the ultra-nationalist counter-revolutionary White

Terror spelled great danger for Jewish Hungarians. In New York City, he developed an interest in Spiritualism and believed he had made contact with his dead father during a séance.

Moving to England in 1929 at the invitation





ABOVE LEFT: One of the supposed photographs of Gef taken by Voirrey Irving. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Voirrey (left), Margaret and Jim Irving in the farmhouse at Doarlish Cashen. **BELOW:** The Gef case continued to fascinate Fodor, who returned to it, now offering a psychoanalytic explanation, in his 1964 book *Between Two Worlds*.

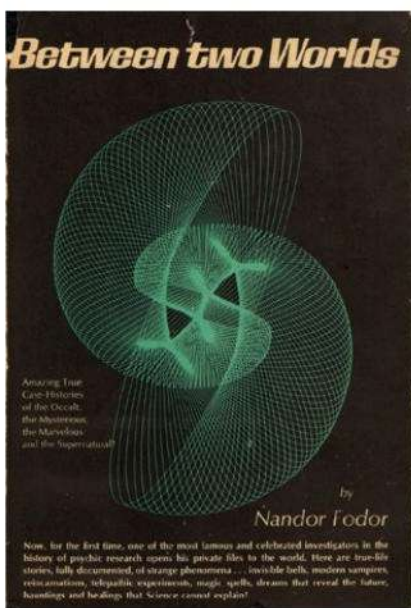
of Lord Rothermere, Fodor immersed himself in the world of psychical research. As a journalist, he conducted interviews with Walter Franklin Prince (founder of the Boston Society for Psychical Research), Hereward Carrington, Arthur Conan Doyle and fellow Hungarian Sandor Ferenczi. The latter, a key figure in the Budapest School of Psychoanalysis, had worked closely with Freud, and also maintained a lifelong interest in telepathy and other paranormal phenomena.

Once in England, Fodor joined the Ghost Club and the London Spiritualist Alliance, where he first made the acquaintance of Harry Price, becoming a well-known and likeable figure on the English Spiritualist scene. His friend and LSA colleague Mercy Phillimore described him as “an easy, friendly soul who... added to the gaiety of life.” While having a great facility with written English, Fodor wasn’t a fluent speaker, and at Spiritualist meetings, “He never failed to speak, and was first up when the chairman declared the discussion open... His words gushed forth – indeed, splashed forth – in torrents at terrific speed, and in the whirl of sounds were many amusing mistakes. He was quite willing to learn about his errors of speech, and joined in the fun.”

Attending demonstration séances for the first time, Fodor was at last “able to witness the phenomena which he had previously only studied in books... The commotion caused by his excitement would not be believed by anyone who had not been present; his jumping and shouting filled the room with deafening noise. It was of course a great thrill for him to witness that of which he had read so much... Later on he became somewhat more cautious and sceptical.”

Appointed chief research officer of the International Institute for Psychical Research in June 1934, Fodor began investigating all manner of paranormal phenomena – séances, haunted houses, poltergeists – with typical enthusiasm and energy.

“I AM DISAPPOINTED THAT YOU DID NOT SPEAK TO ME DURING THE WHOLE WEEK”



A FINE TIME AT DOARLISH CASHEN

Although it wasn’t until 1937 that Fodor travelled to the Isle of Man in search of Gef, he had evidently been following the story with interest since it was first reported in Autumn 1931. Twelve months later, his article “Psychic Science and Animal Phantoms” addressed the subject of animal spirits in the Spiritualist newspaper *Light*. He argued that “if animals do survive, I find nothing preposterous in the supposition that native Medi-

ums could actually, and perhaps purposively, open the door to possession by ‘earthbound’ animal spirits.”

It had been remarked upon by several visitors to the Irving household, including Harry Price, that Margaret (who, unlike her husband James, had Manx ancestry) gave indications of having mediumistic ability. In *The Haunting of Cashen’s Gap*, Price described her as “a tallish woman of fifty-nine, of dignified bearing... her most compelling feature – two magnetic eyes that haunt the visitor with their almost uncanny power. Mrs. Irving belongs to a type that you would guess at first glance to be ‘psychic’; she herself believes firmly in her own powers of intuition, and has gifts of seeing more than ordinary mortals see with the outward eye.”

Journalist Charles Hicks, writing for Spiritualist newspaper *The Two Worlds*, observed that the “atmosphere” in the Irvings’ house was akin to that of a séance room. “I felt quite exhausted, physically and mentally. I have no wish to experience that sensation again.” And Theodora Ahmed, magician Rollo Ahmed’s wife and herself a Spiritualist medium, “felt as though she wanted to go under control, a sensation she resisted during her stay.”

“Her eyes are piercing”, wrote Norah Nicholls (Methuen Books’ publicity manager, and later, Virginia Woolf’s press manager) of Mrs Irving. “Immediately I had the feeling She’s A Witch”. Indeed, Gef himself had nicknamed Mrs Irving “Maggie the Witch-Woman”.

Prior to his stay at Doarlish Cashen, Fodor had assured the Spook that he was “a great pal of yours... much beloved by all the mongooses of the world”. He hoped “to engage in repartee with Gef... lining up what I fondly believed to be a platoon of irresistible subjects guaranteed to overwhelm any Mongoose, talking or silent”.

“I hope that Gef will bear with me and will not throw things at me or spit at me in the

night!” he had written to James Irving, just prior to his arrival. “He has my admiration... I hope he is not afraid of me. He would be the first mongoose that ran away from me. Tell him also that I shall bring him chocolates and biscuits.”

However, the ‘eerie weasel’ failed to make an appearance. Ironically, the nearest personal interaction occurred when Gef did perhaps throw something at him. Fodor had been in the Irvings’ outdoor toilet when a stone mysteriously fell (or was flung) onto its corrugated iron roof. Afterwards, in a letter to Gef, Fodor expressed regret that the two had failed to meet:

“Dear Gef,
I am very disappointed that you did not speak to me during the whole week which I spent here. I came from a long way...

I hope[d] that you would be kind and generous. I believe you to be a very good and very generous mongoose, I brought you chocolates and biscuits and I would have been happy if you had done something for me...

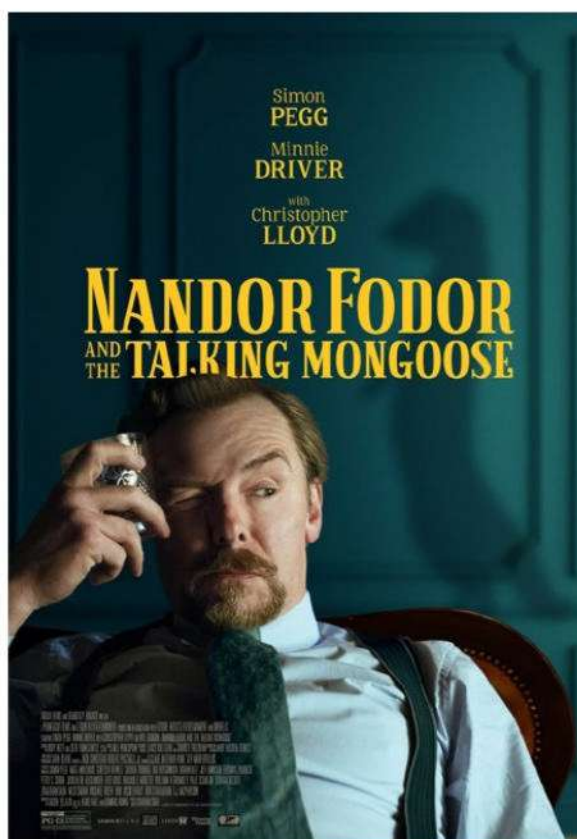
With best wishes,
Your friend”

Despite this, Fodor didn’t regret his visit to Doarlish Cashen. “I have had a fine time”, he told Harry Price’s secretary Ethel Beenham. “My time is well spent. There is no doubt that there is great mystery here.”

During his stay, his interviews with numerous local people had convinced Fodor that the mongoose affair was not an elaborate hoax or jape. Two boys, Harry Hall and Will Cubbon, claimed to have seen as well as heard Gef. Postman John Moore bore witness to Gef’s foul-mouthed invective. John Cowley, a bus mechanic, who lived alone in a first-floor flat, was perplexed at Mr Irving’s detailed knowledge of his home’s interior décor and of the colour of his tea service: Gef had been spying on him. Bus conductor Jack Teare was still angry that the mongoose had stolen his sandwiches.

PHYSICAL OR PSYCHOLOGICAL?

Upon his return to London, Fodor published an article in the *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research* headed “The Truth About the Talking Mongoose”, in which he summarised his findings. “Gef is not a poltergeist... he is not an earthbound spirit and... he is not a ghost.” Despite Gef’s apparent shape-shifting abilities, prodigious strength and powers of invisibility, “the mystery”, Fodor wrote, “is not a psychic one.” The Dalby Spook, he believed, was none other than an “extra clever little mongoose.” Reports of Gef urinating, spitting, and suffering from coughs had all led Fodor to conclude this was a physical, living, breathing animal, and furthermore, an animal that had learned to speak (and sing).



Although he maintained this ‘talking animal’ theory for some years (“is Gef an animal that talks? All probabilities are against it, but all the evidence is for it”), by 1951 Fodor had adopted a markedly different position. Fourteen years after his visit to Doarlish Cashen, he was able to admit that, at the time, “I was not yet equipped with adequate psychoanalytic knowledge to conduct an exploration of [James] Irving’s unconscious. His dream life, I am confident, would have given many sorely needed clues [sic] to understand the intellectual development of Gef and to find the storehouse of his dynamic power.”

Post WWII, Fodor’s published work had moved away from paranormal research. He had co-edited a reference work on psychoanalytic terminology, *Freud: Dictionary of Psychoanalysis* (Philosophical Library, 1950). Other psychoanalytic publications included *The Search for the Beloved: A Clinical Investigation of the Trauma of Birth and Pre-natal Conditioning* (Hermitage Press, 1949), and *New Approaches to Dream Interpretation* (Citadel, 1951). His articles were published in several respected journals, including the *American Journal of Psychotherapy* and the *Journal of Clinical and Experimental Psychopathology*.

Now, he regarded ‘Gef’ as having been a psychological projection of James Irving’s fertile mind, a mind starved of mental stimuli up on Dalby Mountain, living in abject poverty with no radio or telephone, and only a handful of books to distract him from his bleak reality. Gef’s reported plea to Irving: “Oh, let me go, Jim, let me go!” was, Fodor

believed, a significant clue. Dr Walter Henry Maxwell Telling, Professor of Forensic Medicine at the University of Leeds, had suggested that “a split-off part of Irving’s personality should be considered the root of the mystery”, theorising that Irving’s unconscious had somehow captured or “obsessed” a pre-existing animal intellect, as if an ordinary weasel (or mongoose) had been ‘possessed’!

Irving, an intelligent man whose pride would not allow him to acknowledge that he was “a man who failed in life” was also a man “whose passions were too strong to bear this failure with resignation.” And the physical and mental deprivation resulting from a life of poverty in a remote and isolated farmhouse had, Fodor suggested, encouraged Irving’s unconscious mind to manufacture some relief from this desperate state of affairs: “There was no way to relieve it by conscious means. So his unconscious took care of the job and produced the strange hybrid of Gef, fitting no category of humans, animals or ghosts.”

That the case continued to fascinate Fodor (he wrote about Gef yet again in his 1964 book *Between Two Worlds*) comes as no surprise. The fact that, over 90 years after Gef’s first appearance on the world stage, there is still sufficient interest in a cinematic retelling of his story testifies to his enduring appeal. This would undoubtedly appeal to his vanity. In 1933, alluding to that year’s cinema hit *King Kong*, Gef began describing himself as “the Eighth Wonder of the World!”

Now he has his own film.

For more on Gef, see Christopher Josiffe, “Gef the Talking Mongoose”, **FT269:32-40** and “Mongooses of the Empire”, **FT353:34-39**; also **FT315:18-19** and this issue’s Fortean Traveller, pp.56-59.

FURTHER READING

Hereward Carrington and Nandor Fodor, *Haunted People: The Story of the Poltergeist Down the Centuries* (EP Dutton, 1951)

Nandor Fodor, *Between Two Worlds* (Parker Publishing, 1964)

RS Lambert and Harry Price, *The Haunting of Cashen’s Gap*, (Methuen, 1936; Guillemot Press, 2022)

Kate Summerscale, *The Haunting of Alma Fielding: A True Ghost Story*, (Bloomsbury, 2020)



➡ **CHRISTOPHER JOSIFFE** is a regular contributor to *Fortean Times* and the author of *Gef! The Strange Tale of an Extra-Special Talking Mongoose* (Strange Attractor Press, 2017).

THE STRANGE AFFAIR OF THE TWO-HEADED AMULET

Following the purchase of a shaman's amulet on eBay, **JERRY GLOVER** experienced disturbing synchronicities, strange phenomena and even physical injury. But what had he really bought? And how could he escape what appeared to be its grisly history and terrifying curse?

In 2014 I bought a Tibetan amulet on eBay. Back in that innocent time it seemed like a good idea to acquire such a unique and fascinating artefact. Yet after subsequently experiencing uncanny events and serious illness, and my family going through a plethora of misfortunes, I reluctantly let go of it after 956 days.¹ From the outset, I must stress that I'm not going to argue that these events were directly 'caused' by this object due to its being cursed or somehow malign; but the fact is that its presence coincided with the strangest and most tumultuous period of my life. And I was warned about it before things got really bad – which they most certainly did.

Listed as a 'Unique Tibetan Bonpo Shamanic Ceramic Amulet', it was an emaciated figurine of a dicephalic (two-headed) foetus, about 20cm (8in) long, pigmented with an orange powder. Also included were several woodblock-printed Buddhist texts, a small piece of saffron-coloured cloth patterned with swastikas, and – critically for my interest – a card written by a British Museum curator authenticating the amulet.² This was nothing like the 'vampire killing kits' (FT288:32-39) or 'cursed dolls' (see, for example, FT326:10-11, 411:10) that haunt the Really Weird or Totally Bizarre categories to ensnare the unwary eBayers. This thing was genuine,



LEFT: The two-headed amulet bought by the author on eBay in 2014.

FACING PAGE: The life of Bon founder Tonpa Shenrab in a 19th century painting.

"THIS THING WAS GENUINE FORTEAN AND TANGIBLE – A REAL RARITY... I JUST HAD TO HAVE IT..."

fortean *and* tangible – a real rarity. Never having seen anything like it before or since I just had to have it for my little collection of curiosities.

In my hands, the red-brown foetus felt too lightweight to be a ceramic model. Could it be real human remains, desiccated or mummified? Its detailed form, with discernible joints, ribs, fingers, and toes, made this seem disturbingly possible. The curator's card explained how in Bonpo tradition there are five personal gods of the head, and the foetus expressed the sa-

cred unity of Po Lha, the male god, and Mo Lha, the female god. This somehow related to the sharing of wealth between brother and sister, "the prime forces of this belief", as per the Buddhist ritual text.³ Not really knowing what to make of this, it seemed worthwhile

seeking other opinions, so I consulted a few experts and set about looking into just what it was that I now owned. How did it come about and who made it? What did it mean?

CHILDREN OF SHANGRI-LA

The 'Bonpo' of the amulet's description refers to adherents of Yungdrung Bon (or Bön), a tradition practised in Tibet before Buddhism arrived in the eighth century, with animist shamanic roots going back perhaps for many millennia into the Palaeolithic. Yungdrung Bon's founding hero, Tonpa Shenrab, was a royal person with much in common with the Buddha, notwithstanding differences such as how, in one version of the tradition, he arrived in Tibet on a chimerical bird creature. The swastikas of his sceptre are the oldest and unorthodox form of the symbol, being counter-clockwise.⁴ The original Bonpo are to Tibet what the Etruscans are to





ABOVE: Shangri-La, art deco-style, in Frank Capra's 1937 film adapted from James Hilton's bestselling 1933 novel *Lost Horizon*. **BELOW:** Professor Robert Barnett. **BOTTOM:** Professor Barnett thought the woodblock text was "a form of exorcism", but also a "red herring" unconnected to the amulet.

Italy, a people whose origins and religions are unknown. Their citadel of Zhangzhung on the high plateau in north-western Tibet has been linked with Shambhala, a spiritual kingdom ruled by Buddhist kings, and Bon scriptures tell of a comparable land called Tagzig Olmo Lung Ring.⁵ The mountain-enclosed mystical paradise of Shambhala has long been a magnet for the mystically inclined, attracting 19th century Theosophists to weave tales of its immortal adepts (see FT302:32-37, 324:28-35), luring Nazi expeditions (see FT175:30-39), and perhaps also inspiring the secret monastic idyll of moderation and ultra-longevity, Shangri-La, in James Hilton's novel *Lost Horizon*.⁶

Bon has developed in parallel with Tibetan Buddhism so that the two traditions have much in common, both consisting of teachings and rituals, myths, a pantheon, and an ultimate goal of spiritual perfection. Bon monasteries and priesthood are based on the Tibetan Buddhist system, yet there are big differences. The prime deity in Bon is female, for example, as is the Earth, and Bon cosmogonic myths have a strong Iranian influence, with primordial light and fire, and birds' eggs as the sources of animal and human life and the Earth itself.⁷ Bon scriptures like the *Kyeddzog* teach Tantric practices of possession and exorcism in which malign powers like ghosts and demons are brought into the priest's body, and war against evil is waged with fire. Buddhists acknowledge such powers, but do

"TANTRIC PRACTICES IN WHICH MALIGN POWERS LIKE GHOSTS AND DEMONS ARE BROUGHT INTO THE PRIEST'S BODY"



not necessarily see them as existing outside the mind; in any case, Buddhists leave them well alone, recognising the harm they can do. "They too are striving for liberation," wrote Tibetan abbot Thubten Jigme Norbu of the Bonpo, "but they are impatient for it. They seek short cuts and they seek to escape the results of their deeds. They play with powers which they claim to exist outside their own bodies."⁸

The currents between the two traditions flowed freely in the 10th and 11th centuries as Bon developed from its shamanistic roots. For centuries after, it was downplayed and stigmatised, sometimes violently, as a false, dark version of Buddhist ritual. While the Bon tradition is now reintegrated into Tibetan culture, there are different opinions about its status in relation to Buddhism.

ASK THE EXPERTS

The first expert I consulted was Professor Robert Barnett, who found that the woodblock text was a list of well-known guru mantras. Starting with the Amitabha mantra, it included the Padmasambhava and Tara mantras, and concluded with the 100-syllable Vajrasattva mantra for ritual purification.⁹ Professor Charles Ramble replied to me from Nepal, where he has spent over 15 years researching Bon and history. In his view, the mantra texts were irrelevant and so were the curator's notes. "I think it's a form of exorcism," he emailed initially, "but not recorded and not in the least auspicious." Two days later, having consulted Tibetan colleagues, he emailed, that "it doesn't remotely resemble anything that is usually made by lamas (Bon or Buddhist) or shamans for ritual purposes." Although the text was a "red herring", he thought that it might have come from a niche in the upper parts of a stupa. Among Hindus, conjoined twins "seem to be regarded as sacred, since they often resemble multi-limbed divini-



ties”, though not so for Buddhists and certainly not for Tibetans.

Professor Ramble included his own translation of a story from the biographies of a family of Nyingmapa lamas known as the Domarpa. It concerns Drukpa Ringmo, who lived in the eighth century. When out hunting sheep he fell off a cliff and was accidentally killed. Then he rose as a *rolang*, a zombie or revenant, and anyone who encountered him died and also became a *rolang*. These beings terrorised the locality, almost destroying an area near Sakya,¹⁰ until a Buddhist lama subdued them with magical fire, transforming them into consecrated food. An old woman received a ring-finger that she wouldn't eat, whereupon it “came to life again and with a loud noise leapt up and fled.” Opening his robes, the lama flew to catch the zombie finger, bound it in his rosary and subdued it with a command. Stupas (domed-shaped shrines) were built at this place and when daughters are born to the local clan cracks appear in them. Significantly for Professor Ramble, in relation to my amulet, people claim to have seen a child with several heads extracted from one of them. He suggested that the figure, if really human, was an inauspicious birth, either “buried under a stupa (or had a stupa built on top of it) in order to prevent the harm that it would have brought the community; or else it's a replica... used as an effigy in ritual for the subjugation of various demons, possibly vampires (*sri*), which are closely associated with children... I can't imagine that any Tibetan would regard this as being something other than strange and dangerous.” The orange powder on the figure, he added, suggested some veneration.¹¹ I knew it was strange. But dangerous? Why?

That week I also received word from Dmitry Ermakov, a scholarly author who has extensively researched the Bon tradition's shamanic roots. “To be honest I don't really know what it is,” he wrote of the little figure, “except that there is nothing in photos or text which would mark this object as Bonpo. The object resembles Cittipati” – a protector deity in the form of two dancing skeletons known as Lord of the Cemetery in Tibetan and Vajrayana Buddhism – “but probably isn't them because there are no attributes which are associated with them.” He thought the Buddhist mantras had nothing to do with the object, and neither did the curator's note. What he wrote next was concerning. “The object may be a *glud* [Tibetan ransom ritual] or designed to curse or harm... If you cannot ascertain what action this object is connected with, I would advise you to get rid of it, because if it is meant as a repayment of karmic debt to some spirits, then by possessing it you are



LEFT: An 18th century painting of a monk generating a Tantric visualisation. BELOW LEFT: Professor Charles Ramble thought the amulet could be viewed as “strange and dangerous”. BOTTOM: Dmitry Ermakov, whose warning proved prescient.



depriving those whom it meant to appease of their payment and they will haunt you. If it is meant as a curse, then it may transmit to you. The general rule regarding these kind of Tibetan objects is: ‘don't take/buy if not sure what it is for’. That is my advice. Take good care.”

Since I certainly did not know what it was for, I hoped to assuage the alarm Dmitry's warning stirred by asking for his advice about curses and the repayment of karmic debts. Was there a way to neutralise it, to render it safe in my keeping? “It might be connected to some Tibetan Buddhist ritual or magic,” he replied. “The best way of rendering ransoms or black magic objects harmless is to get rid of them and then do *zlog pa* ritual... there are other methods, but they are tied up with *sgrol ba* rites of wrathful *yidams* [a deity associated with Tantric Buddhism] and require empowerments, years of practice and actual realisation of Tantric powers which few possess nowadays... Good luck!”¹²

Black magic. Wrathful *yidams*. Empowerments requiring years of practice. So much for assuaging my alarm.

ANNUS HORIBILIS

Over the next year, life for myself and my immediate family became increasingly troubled and strange. For several years I had been working on a research project that was getting more expansive and difficult to resolve, and I was having doubts about the project's viability and about my ability to bring it to a conclusion. The long periods I was spending alone working on it were undermining my mental well-being. I was becoming an insomniac. In addition, I kept

finding scratches on my body that I didn't recall making myself, and I had an extremely vivid nightmare of revolting moth-mice creatures flying around my bedroom door.

Over 2015 things improved for a brief time, but life was trending negatively, like a slow-moving landslide. I spent more time escaping into videogame worlds; once, while playing, a heavy book that was leaning against a bookshelf a few feet away from me tipped over, a physical impossibility. A few days later, a clay object I had made ‘jumped’ off the mantelpiece as I – standing right next to it – momentarily lost consciousness. This was witnessed by my friend, Terry Emm.¹³ Social media exchanges I weighed into over research subjects further undermined my mental health, worsening my insomnia. Within a year, our dog became lame and had to be put down, and two close relatives and a next-door neighbour whom I had befriended passed away. These deaths, I must stress, were not sudden and unexpected, but were keenly felt by me, as well as my wife and daughter, only adding to other pressures that were affecting them. My emotions were close to the surface, causing me to lose control, crying in despair or shouting at my family.

The warning from Dmitry Ermakov played on my mind, and I still had no idea what the amulet was made from. In the hope of having it analysed, I contacted Dr Daniel Antoine, Curator of Physical Anthropology in the Department of Ancient Egypt and Sudan at the British Museum. He replied that he was unable to conduct a CT scan on the object, but in his opinion, the size and shape of the skeletons meant they were “not anatomically correct and they are unlikely to be based on actual human remains.”¹⁴ While it was a relief to get this opinion, I was becoming superstitious about the amulet and attached to



DIMITRY ERMAKOV



ABOVE LEFT: Wanthing and Khun Phaen, who made a *kumanthong* from his own son. **ABOVE RIGHT:** A *luk krok* at Wat Chang Yai Buddhist temple in Thailand. **BELOW:** A Cittipati protector deity as depicted in the Gelugpa Monastery, Nepal. **BOTTOM:** Dr Patrick Quinn found the figure to be composed not of human flesh, but a sort of resin.

the idea that it had something to do with the negative events that were clustering around my family.

The body scratches got worse, and it was hard to ignore them. Three pronounced parallel scratches up to about six inches (15cm) long would appear each time, as in some cases of poltergeist or entity assault. Since these were usually on my legs or chest, I could ascribe them to unconscious self-harm, until the occasion when, as my wife and I got ready to go to a funeral, I suddenly felt a stinging heat on my back. This time the scratches had appeared where it was clearly not possible for me to reach. My wife was nonplussed. What could we do?

In the midst of these emotional traumas, strange events and other stressful mishaps,¹⁵ I became seriously unwell. The sole of my right foot became infected through a small cut, worsening over two months to the point where I was unable to walk or sleep. It got so bad that I was literally crawling on the floor in the most excruciating and sustained agony I have ever known. Antibiotics and painkillers probably stopped the infection from getting worse, but brought no comfort, and I fantasised about dying just to end the torment. While the cause of this was no mystery, a disquieting connection to the amulet became apparent.

In the winter of 2016-17, when my condition was getting so dire I could only leave the house to go to a hospital A&E Department, I contacted Dr Patrick Quinn at the UCL Institute of Archaeology to see if he could determine what the figure was made of. As a leading expert in Ceramic Petrography, he offered to analyse the figure, for which he needed to remove a small amount of sample material, to which I agreed provided the sample was taken from an unobtrusive place. By examining the sample with scanning electron microanalysis, Dr Quinn could determine that the figure was clearly



I HAD THE IDEA THAT THE AMULET HAD SOMETHING TO DO WITH THE NEGATIVE EVENTS CLUSTERING AROUND MY FAMILY

not human flesh and bone and was unlike any ceramic he knew.

"The high percentage of carbon within the amulet and its waxy smell during cutting suggested that it is made of some sort of

plastic, resin or wax." With infrared spectroscopy he confirmed that it was composed of some sort of hydrocarbon, a man-made composite substance with calcium-bearing inclusions that appeared to be some sort of additive,¹⁶ perhaps a kind of resin with finely-crushed stones.

While it was a huge relief to find the figure was not a real human foetus, the escalating series of weird and painful events, both physical and emotional, that clustered around my ownership of it, as well as the warning I had received, impressed me with the sense that perhaps I was treating it in a way that was dangerously wrong. I still had no firm idea of what it actually was, what it was meant for, or what to do with it. This chilling epiphany culminated when the figure was returned to me and I found that the analysis sample had been cut off the underside of the right foot – the very place where my infection had started before spreading so painfully.

With all this going on – which now began to involve my parents, who had moved in with us – I hid the amulet off my property in the autumn of 2016 and we did a basic incense ritual to cleanse the house. A few weeks later, I relinquished it to someone else, glad to sell it at a loss. I was reluctant to let go of it, but was at such a low ebb by then I just couldn't take the chance, however irrational it was, that something else might befall my family due to my continued ownership of the amulet.

GOLDEN CHILDREN

In 2022, with life on a more even keel, I delved back into research, finding that the two-headed curiosity in all likelihood actually came from Thailand. One of the first references to such an object is found



in the *Khun Chang Khun Phaen*, an epic poem that originated as a folk story around the late 1500s, possibly from historical events. Here, two childhood friends become rivals over the course of their lives while competing for the love of a woman. The titular hero, Khun Phaen, is poisoned by one of his wives at the behest of her bandit chief father, so he stabs her to death one night. Then, having learned various kinds of magic, he cuts their unborn son from his dead wife's womb and performs an intricate ritual that culminates in roasting the foetus over a wood fire. "Just as the dawn brightened and the golden sun rose," this famous passage ends, "it was dry and crisp as he wanted."¹⁷ Thus by necromancy he makes a *kumanthong*, a Golden Child imbued with a super-powerful protective spirit. This is closely akin to a *luk krok* (Child Spirit) where the mother might survive the stillbirth of the child, though – as might be expected in the ways of black magic – it is less powerful than the kind involving violent murder.

While *kumanthong* are now usually defined as the spirits of dead children, which may come to inhabit amulets or figurines, *kuman-thep* are a special category of ghosts of foetuses or infants. These spirits have good intentions, yet the most powerful kind, the *kuman-phrai* issuing from the violent deaths of foetuses, can be dangerous if not properly cared for. *Kumanthongs* are obtained from temples or spirit mediums, and examples of these charms, including the *luk-krok* foetus forms, are still displayed in Thai Buddhist monasteries. A dicephalic foetus came to the shrine of Wat Pradu in Bangkok in the 1960s. As a twin it is considered especially propitious and offerings of snacks or toys are made in pairs. Perhaps



LEFT: Two of the gold leaf-covered foetuses that Chow Hok Kuen tried to smuggle in 2012.
BOTTOM: A typical Thai *kumanthong* amulet.

it was the basis for my reproduction. The monks claim this one grows, requiring a bigger casing every decade or so.¹⁸

Typically, the *luk krok* mothers keep them as benevolent assistants but, given how the protective amulet industry is big business in Thailand, unwanted foetuses may be traded. In May 2012 British citizen Chow Hok Kuen, 28, was arrested in Bangkok for attempting to smuggle six gold leaf-covered roasted male foetuses he had acquired for \$6,400, intending to sell them for six times the price. Hundreds of foetuses intended for the same purpose that were discovered in 2010 showed that illegal abortion clinics were prime suppliers of this most ghastly commodity.¹⁹

What am I to make of those experiences in my time with the replica *luk krok* and its potential *kumanthong* spirit? The physical

effects, such as the falling book and the bodily scratches (which I previously experienced as a teenager in conjunction with a vivid succubus), were certainly real, and *kumanthong* can potentially overturn household objects and cause harm, even death.²⁰ As for the amulet, even though I knew my own carelessness had caused the infection, and the amulet was damaged in the laboratory after I was infected, might I have been drawn into a kind of negative non-local quantum entanglement by my having displeased its spirit? The fact is that I had not suffered anything like this before, nor had the amulet been similarly damaged since it was made: both occurred in the same timeframe.

All the other strange experiences may well have been a statistically inexplicable cluster of coincidences given undue meaning by apophenia – the ascribing of meaning to connections between a cluster of strange and disturbing, but unconnected, events. As Robert Anton Wilson's dictum put it: "The uncanny, then, is just the right hemisphere's way of violently capturing our attention."²¹

Yet I must question the possibility that dark energy and synchronicity were at work, for the contractual aspect of *kumanthong* ownership brings the responsibility of fulfilling "one's end of the bargain", keeping the *kumanthong* happy.²² It is apparent that I may have failed in that.

My advice: If you should ever acquire a shamanic amulet, then take no chances and do right by it.²³

❖ JERRY GLOVER is a writer, historian, and longtime FT contributor. You can read more at www.jerryglover.com



NOTES

1 5 Oct 2014 to 18 May 2017.

2 Vladimir Zwalf (1932-2002) was an Assistant Keeper in the Department of Oriental Antiquities at the British Museum.

3 Zwalf, 1995, citing Jeff Watt & Samten Karmay, *Bon: The Magic Word*, Philip Wilson Publishers (2007).

4 Tonpa Shenrab lived anywhere between 18,000 and 4,000 years ago, depending on sources. Charles Allen, *The Search for Shangri-La*, Little Brown and Company (2007), pp.88, 225.

5 Per Kaværne, *The Bon Religion of Tibet*, Shamb-

hala (1996).

6 Zhangzhung has been identified with an Iron Age culture on the Chang Tang plateau. Charles Allen, op. cit. 2007, pp.14-15, 39. James Hilton visited the Hunza Valley in Pakistan, another likely influence on Shangri-La.

7 Ibid., pp.88-89, 219, 232.

8 Thubten Jigme Norbu & Colin Turnbull, *Tibet*, Penguin Books (1969), pp.132-133.

9 Email from Dr Robert Barnett, 12 Dec 2014. Padmasambhava was a Tantric Buddhist Vajra master, central to the transmission of Buddhism from India to Tibet in the 8th century. Amitabha is

the main Buddha of Pure Land Buddhism. Tara, representing the virtues of successful work, is a female bodhisattva in Mahayana Buddhism and Buddha in Vajrayana Buddhism.

10 Sakya monastery, seat of one of the four major schools of Tibetan Buddhism, has a library of 84,000 scriptures, with one weighing more than a grand piano. www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sakya_Monastery.

11 Emails from Dr Charles Ramble, 5, 7 & 12 Jan 2015.

12 Emails from Dimitry Ermakov, 5 & 6 Jan 2015.

13 Singer-songwriter and author of *The Reincarnation of Giordano Bruno*, The

Memory Palace Publishing (2016).

14 Email, 12 Oct 2015.

15 Including driving my wife and daughter 200 miles to a relative's funeral on the wrong day, and my family and I getting locked out of the house minutes before being due to go on holiday.

16 Dr Patrick Quinn, 'Material Analysis of Tibetan Bon Shamanic Amulet', 24 Feb 2016.

17 www.ayutthaya-history.com/Misc_LukKrok.html. The family-friendly action adventure movie *Khun Phaen Begins* (2019) wisely sidesteps this origin of the titular hero's child spirit ally.

18 Megan Sinnott, 'Baby

Ghosts: Child Spirits and Contemporary Conceptions of Childhood in Thailand', Cambridge University Press, 2014 (online).

19 Alex Williams, 'Thailand's ghastly wards: the magic of dead foetus', investvine.com, 20 June 2013; Justin McDaniel, 'Thai Buddhism: Magic, Money, and Murder', huffpost.com, 19 Dec 2011.

20 Megan Sinnott, Ibid.

21 Robert Anton Wilson, *Coincidence*, New Falcon Publications, 1988, p.155.

22 Megan Sinnott, Ibid.

23 Ebay terms & conditions don't require sellers of magical amulets to disclose any responsibility of care as a condition of sale.

THIS ISLAND EARTH

CHARLES FORT'S *NEW LANDS* AT 100

A century on from its publication, **ULRICH MAGIN** examines the genesis, reception and legacy of Charles Fort's follow-up to his seminal *Book of the Damned*. Was *New Lands*, with its narrow focus and now dated ideas, a classic case of 'second album syndrome'?

"Lands in the sky— That they are nearby—"

So begins Charles Fort's *New Lands*, thus laying the groundwork for every UFO book of the 1950s that suggested that we were being visited by aliens from Mars or Venus.

Fort's second major non-fiction work, *New Lands*, is a difficult book. It lacks the monumentality of *The Book of the Damned*, the wide and playful scope of *Lo!* or the immediacy of *Wild Talents*. And sometimes, when you read it, you can feel that Fort takes his ideas a bit too seriously – that he believes in alien visitors, nearby worlds in our planet's atmosphere, and even a flat Earth. The aloofness from his own whimsical explanations that characterised *The Book of the Damned* is certainly less evident here.

That is not to say the book is not full of quotable aphorisms – one immediately thinks of the remark that a mirage of the Ohio town of Sandusky had been taken by some to show Heaven, and "those of us who have no desire to go to Sandusky may ponder that point" (chapter 27), or the paraphrase of Melville's *Moby Dick*, "Char me the trunk of a redwood tree. Give me pages of white chalk cliffs to write upon. Magnify me thousands of times, and replace my trifling immodesties with a titanic megalomania – then might I write largely enough for our subjects."¹ But as poignant as the remarks are, the content of the book admittedly appears pretty outdated today. It is difficult to read Fort's speculations on a small Universe with the planets nearby and the Sun rotating around the Earth without thinking he was some sort of crackpot. It's the classic 'difficult second album' problem faced by pop musicians: you have 20 years to get your first record out, and then only a few for the second one.

The Book of the Damned was published in 1919 (see Ulrich Magin, 'It Was One Hundred Years Ago Today', *FT*386:38-43), and *New Lands* came out in 1923 – 100 years ago today, or close enough.

Facts, Fiction and Poetry

Little is known about the writing process: there are no drafts, and almost no correspondence. It was in 1920 when Fort and his wife



HE BELIEVES IN ALIEN VISITORS, WORLDS IN OUR PLANET'S ATMOSPHERE AND EVEN A FLAT EARTH



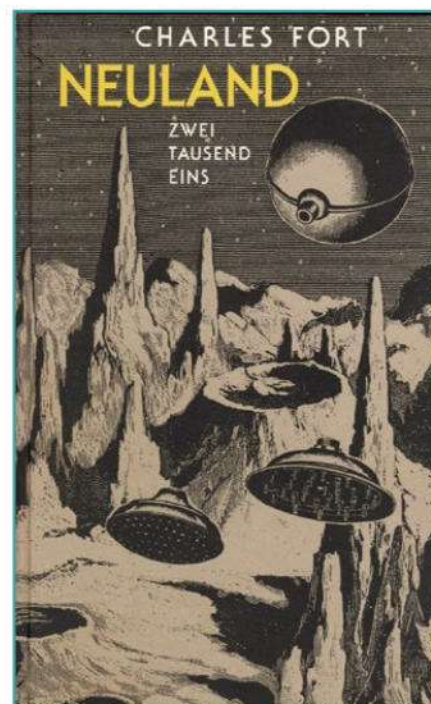
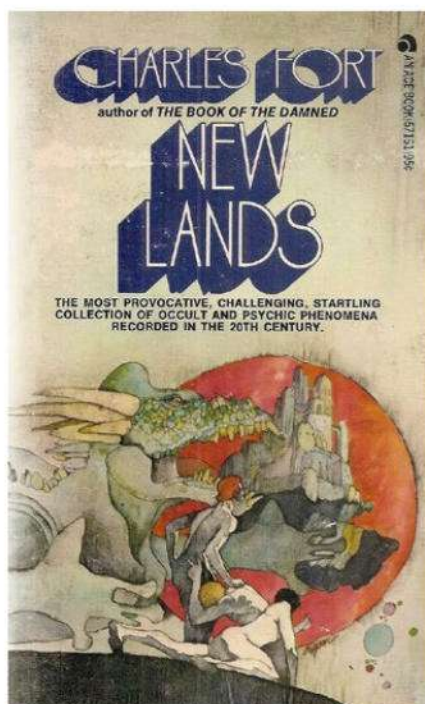
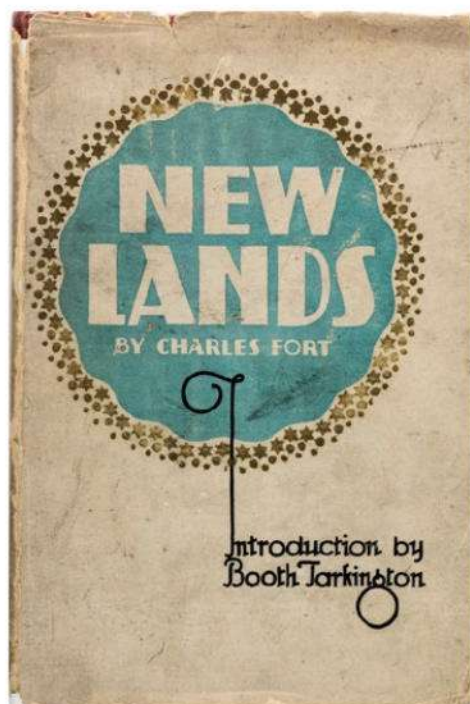
BELOW LEFT: Charles Fort and his wife Anna moved to London in 1920, taking up residence at 15 Marchmont Street, close to the British Museum where he was working on *New Lands*. The building has long since been demolished, but the Forts' later address at No 39 is marked with a commemorative plaque.

Anna moved to London, taking up residence at 15 Marchmont Street, only a few hundred yards from the British Museum. Fort was working on *New Lands* there, going through newspapers in the day and reading to Anna what he had written in the evening. They were not well-off, and Fort always feared his wife might spend too much on food. Anna also remembered, talking later to Theodore Dreiser, that Fort would "stand in the street and gaze at the stars and point them out to me and tell me the meaning of it. Then up in our rooms he would throw open the windows and stand gazing at the stars. That was his delight for a long, long time."

He was longing, as he wrote to his brother Raymond in January 1921, to join an expedition to the Moon "to find out what there is in these things I'm writing about."² In June 1922, Fort and his wife returned to New York, only to resettle in London in May 1923, this time at 39 Marchmont Street, probably Fort's best known address. Here he made his doomed experiments with his telekinetic influence on pictures on his walls, as later described in *Wild Talents*.

While still in New York, Fort had sent the first draft of his second book to J David Stern, the editor of the Camden, New Jersey, *Daily Courier*. It was not on his own volition: Stern, who had liked *The Book of the Damned*, had asked him about his new book. Fort sent in his manuscript, then called "Chaos".³

For some reason, Fort didn't like what he had, and did not want to supply it to his publishers, Boni and Liveright. He kept rearranging his material for several months (and the delicate arrangement of snippets, and the mix between facts and philosophy, is one of the postmodern techniques Fort invented before their time). When finally satisfied, he packed the new manuscript, now titled "New Lands", and sent it to his old friend and mentor Theodore Dreiser on 23 January 1922. "We may have to take ourselves somewhat seriously? That would be a damn shame, wouldn't



ABOVE: *New Lands* over the decades: A first edition, with its rare dust jacket, from 1923; a mass market paperback from 1968; and a modern German translation. BELOW: Novelist and early Fort fan Booth Tarkington, of *The Magnificent Ambersons* fame, provided the introduction to *New Lands*.

it?” he said in an accompanying note.⁴

Later in the year, he informed Dreiser that Liveright had accepted the book. He was no longer in New York when it was published on 8 or 9 October 1923.⁵

The book, generally, is out to show that astronomers are all wrong, that the stars are close to the Earth and may be little but holes in a shell that surrounds the globe (or flat Earth), and that voyagers from lands between our surface and the shell have been visiting since mankind’s earliest days. That this sounds outdated after we’ve landed on the Moon and sent satellites beyond our Solar System goes without saying.

The book contains some good factoids, like the astronomer Gruithuisen’s observation of cities on the Moon, and very detailed discussions of a flat Earth, as well as the first comprehensive collection of strange lights in the sky that would later become the material on which the whole UFO edifice was constructed. It introduces many fortean ideas and annoying stupidities – the concept of Triangles, the idea of UFOs as space visitors, the theory of Ancient Astronauts.

And then there are passages of stunning beauty: “If we could stop to sing, instead of everlastingly noting vol. this and p. that, we could have the material of sagas – of the bathers in the sun, which may be neither intolerably hot nor too uncomfortably cold; and of the hermit who floats across the moon; of heroes and the hairy monsters of the sky. I should stand in public places and sing our data – sagas of parades and explorations and massacres in the sky – having a busy band of accompanists, who set off fireworks, and send up balloons, and fire off explosives at regular intervals – extra-geographic songs of boiling

lakes and floating islands – extra-sociologic metres that express the tramp of space-armies upon interplanetary paths covered with little black pebbles – biologic epics of the clouds of mammoths and horses and antelopes that once upon a time fell from the sky upon the northern coast of Siberia – [...]

But after all, it may be better that we go back to Rept. B.A. – see the vol. for 1849, p. 46 – a stream of black objects, crossing the sun, watched, at Naples, May 11, 1845, by Capocci and other astronomers – things that may have been seeds.”

The Magnificent Tarkington

Liveright had managed to get an introduction by Booth Tarkington, the novelist best known for his 1918 novel *The Magnificent Ambersons* (filmed by Orson Welles in 1942).

He had become hooked on Fort, he says, some years back when, bedridden, he happened to find a copy of *The Book of the Damned*. He opened it, read a few paragraphs, and “with some astonishment, I continued to dip into the book, sounding it here and there”. So many parts excited him that he “turned back to the beginning and read this vigorous and astonishing book straight through, and then re-read it for the pleasure it gave me in the way of its writing and in the substance of what it told. Dore should have illustrated it, I thought, or Blake. Here indeed was a ‘brush dipped in earthquake and eclipse’; though the wildest mundane earthquakes are but earthquakes in teapots compared to what goes on in the visions conjured up

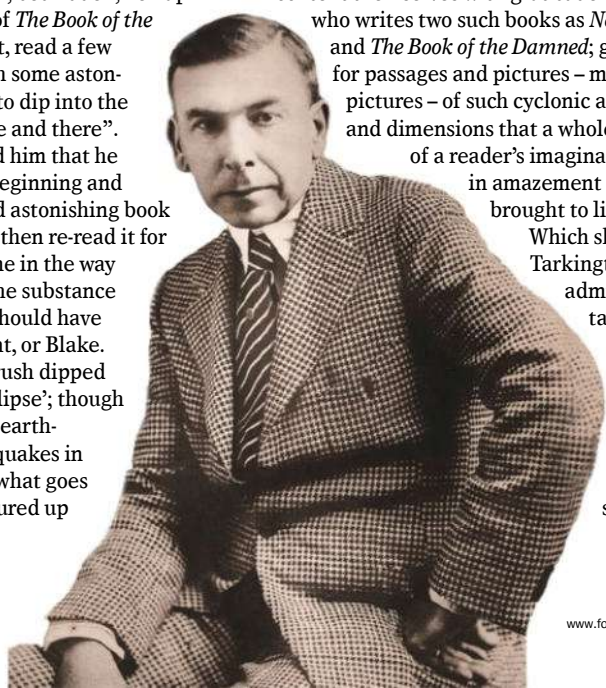
before us by Mr Charles Fort.”

“Now he has followed *The Book of the Damned* with *New Lands* pointing incidentally to Mars as ‘the San Salvador of the Sky’, and renewing his passion for the dismayingly significant ‘damned’ tokens and strange hints excluded by the historically mercurial acceptances of ‘Dogmatic Science’. Of his attack on the astronomers it can at least be said that the literature of indignation is enriched by it.

“To the ‘university-trained mind’ here is wildness almost as wild as Roger Bacon’s once appeared to be; though of course even the layest of lay brothers must not assume that all wild science will in time become accepted law, as some of Roger’s did. Retort to Mr Fort must be left to the outraged astronomer, if indeed any astronomer could feel himself so little outraged as to offer a retort. Lay brethren are outside the quarrel and must content themselves with gratitude to a man

who writes two such books as *New Lands* and *The Book of the Damned*; gratitude for passages and pictures – moving pictures – of such cyclonic activity and dimensions that a whole new area of a reader’s imagination stirs in amazement and is brought to life.”

Which shows that Tarkington, while admiring Fort’s talent, was not too clear about what Fort was actually saying.⁶



The reviews are in

New Lands appeared in bookshops in October (copyrighted 8 Oct): 249 pages, price three dollars. It had a print-run of "no more than 1,000 copies" according to Mr X in his excellent Internet edition.⁷ Small ads, like one in the *Nation* (1923, p.407) advertised it with the by-line "An amazing expose of astronomical 'certainties'".

There must have been advance promotion, as a short humorous note was published before the book was in the shops. The *Brazilian American* (#209, 1923) pondered how we look into the sky longing for a loved one. "And now we are told by Charles Fort in *NEW LANDS*, a book to be published in October, that one must look towards the skies not only for sweethearts, but also for adventures. He makes other startling assertions. First that the Earth neither revolves on its axis nor moves in an orbit, but is absolutely stationary. Second, that the stars are not luminous bodies but are openings in a matrix or shell-like substance which surrounds the Earth."

When *The Book of the Damned* appeared, it was greeted with reviews calling Fort either a genius or a madman – sometimes both. Reviews of *New Lands*, however, were mixed and less enthusiastic. None of the writers noticed Fort's writing style, but all concentrated on his theories. And many were just not convinced. I can sympathise with that.

The *New York Times*, announcing the book on 24 June 1923, suggested that Fort was "not sure that the Earth is round" and assumed he was quite serious. In a longer review on 25 Nov that year, headlined "Those Terrible Astronomers!" R Heylbit Wollstein said "the author of the volcanic *Book of the Damned* has put forth a further chapter in his opus of inverted damnation. The pages at hand, which he styles 'banners in a cosmic procession,' champion – and most vigorously! – the cause of certain astronomical hypotheses which are not recognised according to the accepted theories of that science." The *Boston Transcript*, too, thought it was "an amazingly interesting book."⁸

The book was even noticed in New Zealand, where the *Wellington Evening Post* noted on 3 Nov 1923: "A book which sets forth some startling theories is *New Lands* by Charles Fort, author of the *Book of the Damned*. The title refers to the other planets, which the author suggests have been communicating with us for years. He doubts whether the Earth is round and whether it revolves around the Sun, and he questions the measurements of interplanetary distances as given by astronomers."

Arts & Decoration reviewed the book in Nov 1924. The text was by the poet Benjamin de Casseres, and while he paraphrased the content, he was also highly euphoric about Fort's ideas: "*New Lands*... is a continuation of his astounding *The Book of the Damned*. Fort is trying to overthrow Copernicus, Galileo, Newton and the whole aristocracy of scientific ignorance. He is one of the most tremendous imaginations that the world has yet had – Poe, Blake, Doré and Einstein all in

Are Skies Spies of Other Worlds Snooping Around Lil' Ol' Earth




Spies from another world – celestial emissaries – may work earth, planning the destruction of man, the annihilation of his civilization and the annexation of his globe!

The ponderous skyships of rival worlds have sailed the air of earth, and even traversed its seas, says Charles Fort, author of the "Book of the Damned."

What is more probable, then, than that they have sent investigators here to work and watch and plan against the time when invasion will take place?

Fort presents no argument, has no propaganda and claims no purpose but the confusion of science. In 500 pages he sets forth the alleged facts of alleged phenomena that science, he holds, has never satisfactorily explained.

Rains of Frogs.

These are the "damned facts." They are "damned" because they are excluded by science. Fort makes them march in a fools' parade, up and down and all around, and every few pages challenges science to explain.

There have been, says Fort, and offers the dates and accounts of reputable scientific journals –

Falls from the sky of stones, frogs, ice, blood, oil, metal, birds, strange plants and unidentified substances.

Huge wheeled chariots of luminous fire, seen by mariners at sea.

Dark bodies – small worlds or magnificent celestial transports – between the sun and the earth and the earth and the moon even.

Curious markings made on the surface of the earth and curious markings on stones that have fallen.

"Pipe Dreams?"

Science has blithely explained the strange "falls" with its axioms – all that comes down must have gone up." It has said that if stones actually fell they must have been carried into the air by a volcano or a cyclone.

Of the mysterious and luminous shapes that sailors report sightings have said are "optical hallucinations," which is a scholar's way of saying "pipe dreams." Nevertheless – the reports have been numerous and have

been made by trustworthy sea captains and their crews.

But on the "dark shapes between the sun" matter, Fort rather "sticks" his opponents. Astronomers have seen such shapes and pondered and wondered and finally "given it up."

So – Fort summarizes – it is easier to believe than it is not to believe, that – Great worlds have come close to ours. Leviathans of the ether, carrying passengers and huge freight cargoes, have sailed within our atmosphere; been wrecked occasionally in ice fields of the upper strata and their fuel and the contents of their pantries dumped on earth.

By some unexplained means the inhabitants of another planet have contrived to mark our earth with "cup marks" and strange hieroglyphics on rocks – not for our edification, but for the instruction of their spies left here by the great airships.

Regardless of whether Fort can convince us of the truth of his beliefs of the meanings of things, the "Book of the Damned" does make one stop to wonder if science really reads the language of earth happenings accurately.

DR. M. S. FICARD
Diseases of Children.

DR. D. H. ALVERSON
208 Majestic Building
Office 3238. Residence 3982.

ARTHUR J. NEWMAN, MONUMENTS.
1611 Texas Avenue.



The A

Modern equipment.
Such progress.
Co. J. P. Morgan & Co.
Willis-Overland Co. use A

GF All

Office F

ABOVE: An article about Fort from the *Times of Shreveport*, Louisiana, 16 July 1920, teases many of the ideas that would be discussed at length in *New Lands*; variants of this headline continue to appear 100 years later.

one. There is no book extant like *New Lands*." *The Literary Digest International Book Review* carried a review in 1924, while the *Theosophical Quarterly* in 1932 (p. 184) reviewed *The Book of the Damned*, *New Lands*, and *Lo!* together: "Mr Fort has recorded some extraordinary events which are said to have occurred during the past hundred years." *The Writer*, in a long piece on *Wild Talents* in 1932 (p. 214), opined that "*New Lands* succeeded *The Book of the Damned*, and followed

it into temporary obscurity."

However obscure it might have temporarily been, it was not forgotten.

New Lands and Old Gods

New Lands attracted the attention of two authors. One of them would later be instrumental in securing a book contract for Fort's third book, *Lo!*, with his own publisher, Claude Kendall. This was Tiffany Thayer, a novelist who wrote popular fiction and who



ABOVE LEFT: Ben Hecht. **ABOVE CENTRE:** HP Lovecraft found *New Lands* less interesting than *The Book of the Damned*. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Tiffany Thayer with his pet python. **BELOW:** Fort's letter, printed in the *New York Times* of 31 August 1924, asking readers for any information they might have about possible visitors from space.

contacted Fort after reading *New Lands*. It was an acquaintanceship that proved fortunate for Fort across the world over (see **FT200:48-52**), leading to the founding of the Fortean Society.

The second author was HP Lovecraft, who was heavily influenced by Fort. Lovecraft had enjoyed *The Book of the Damned*, though more for its science fiction ideas than its philosophy, which the materialist horror writer regarded as non-scientific. “I also skimmed over Charles Fort’s *New Lands*, but didn’t find it as interesting as *The Book of the Damned*,” he wrote in 1927,⁹ although he also admitted that “No idea has ever fascinated me so much as that of the wafting of alien life across space, and I have enjoyed reading about these doubtful phenomena in books like Charles Fort’s eccentric *Book of the Damned & New Lands*.”¹⁰ And he noted: “It ought to be significant that no genuine man of science has ever taken Fort seriously.”¹¹ He valued Fort’s data, if not the ideas behind them, and used material about the Moodus noises (FT399:74-77) from *New Lands* in a story of his own.¹² But as Lovecraft was a marginal figure himself, neither his advocacy nor his enmity made any great impact.

The long road to stardom

In the following years, the book regularly resurfaced in newspaper and magazine articles, often viewed with the hindsight of the later *Lo!* and *Wild Talents* – as in a piece in *Letters* on 5 Aug 1936, which mixed stories from *New Lands* with material from *Lo!*: “Still more fantastic were Fort’s suggestions that Science could not prove the Earth revolved around the Sun, that the stars were merely holes in a gelatinous shell surrounding the Earth ... In *New Lands*, Charles Fort demanded that science explain why statues shed blood, why frogs and periwinkles fall to earth in rainstorms, why eels appear in land-

“NO IDEA HAS EVER FASCINATED ME SO MUCH AS THAT OF THE WAFING OF ALIEN LIFE ACROSS SPACE”

locked water. What about the swan which mysteriously appeared in Central Park after the celebrated Dorothy Arnold mysteriously disappeared? What about the Chippewa Indian who prayed for food for his child, promptly drew milk from his breast?"

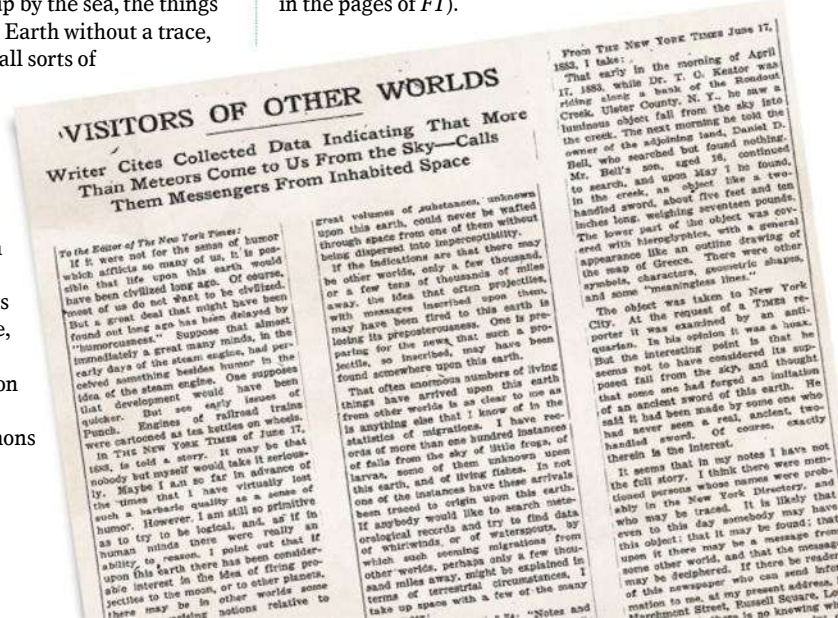
There is also a hint of uneasiness about Fort's astronomic theories when Ben Hecht, one of the founders of the Fortean Society, wrote about Fort in his great and still extremely readable book *1001 Afternoons in New York*: "I don't want to exaggerate the genius of Charles Fort. He was no philosophical comet. He was more a roller-coaster that took everybody for a ride. And for us Forteans the sciences have never quite recovered from this frolic. For us, the lights in the skies, the strange things cast up by the sea, the things that vanish from the Earth without a trace, and the presence of all sorts of goofy dust rains everywhere will always take first place over Euclid... It is possible that our master was a little mad, and given to seeing chimeras where only crackpots existed. It is possible, too, that there is a touch of Flash Gordon in his vision of sky monsters, cloud demons

and astral were-wolves bedevilling the Earth. But the looney fringes that hang from his sacerdotal robes are a minor matter.”¹³

Still, there were people who took it literally (there still are), such as the anonymous writer calling himself NEO-PTOLEMAIC in the Melbourne Age on 16 Sept 1933. He quotes *New Lands* and says, “He seems to have completely exploded the pretensions of the astronomers. No astronomer in the USA has ‘easily refuted’ Fort’s suggestions so far, but no doubt some of the local lads will try anything once.” Interestingly for the early history of fortuneism, the letter writer also states that he was “probably the first Australian disciple of the late Charles Fort, of Albany, USA, concerning whom I lectured recently in Sydney.”

From letters to Lo!

After *New Lands* was published, Fort began firing off letters to newspapers in search of new material or to confirm clippings he already had collected. This must have been a very intense period of work, for I have collected dozens of these letters and others can be found online (or have been reprinted in the pages of *FT*).



VISITORS OF OTHER WORLDS

Writer Cites Collected Data Indicating That More Than Meteors Come to Us From the Sky—Calls Them Messengers From Inhabited Space

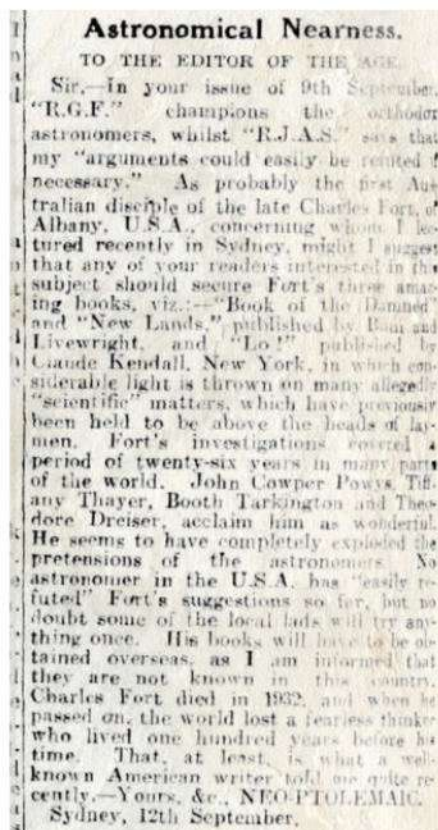
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In all of these letters, Fort appears as a firm believer in visitors from space, and as an advocate of his own theories, confirming the suspicion he took his astronomical ideas all too seriously. Under the heading “Visitors of other Worlds; Writer Cites Collected Data Indicating That More Than Meteors Come to Us From the Sky – Calls Them Messengers From Inhabited Space” the *New York Times* on 31 Aug 1924 prints a letter Fort sent from London, pointing out just what the title says. It starts in typical Fort fashion: “If it were not for the sense of humor which afflicts so many of us, it is possible that life upon this Earth would have been civilized long ago. Of course, most of us do not want to be civilized. But a great deal that might have been found out long ago has been delayed by ‘humorousness’.” He then appeals for information about possible space travellers. A follow-up communication published on 18 Oct 1925 tells us his appeal was a success. It “brought so many replies from places as far apart as Lovelock, Nev., and Middlesex, England, that I have reason for thinking there is considerable interest in this subject.” The NYT, unaware that Fort came from Albany, called him an ‘English Investigator’. The mistake is repeated by the paper concerning another letter from 5 Sept 1926, when he is described as a “British Observer” who “Argues in the Affirmative and Seeks News Of Future Manifestations”. This reads like it came from the golden age of UFO contactees. Pointing out that in a few weeks the “planet Mars will be in opposition, and the subject of communication between worlds will occupy much space, which, if it could be traversed instead of read, might enable some of us to ask the Martians what they mean by those strange lights of theirs, and what their intentions are.” Fort asks any reader to inform him when they “hear of anything that seems to be worth investigating.”

Further letters presenting Fort’s ‘space travellers have been here’ ideas were printed in the German titled, but English language *Samoanische Zeitung* of 9 Oct 1925 (“Explorers from other Worlds?”), in New Zealand’s *Auckland Star* on 14 Oct 1926 (“From Outer Space – Or Where?”) and in the *New York Times* of 28 Mar 1926 (“Expedition Into Space”).

Yet other interests began to surface. On 7 May 1925, the *Brisbane Courier* in Australia carried a letter by Fort about sea-monsters (a topic he would address in *Lo!*), but clearly with *New Lands* still firmly in his mind.

“For some years I have been collecting data upon reported monsters in the sea, and, remarkably, the material has drifted away from accounts of the traditional sea serpent. It may be that sometimes, in the sea, have been seen enormous, unknown mammals, the size of whales, but not cetaceans. The extraordinary implication of this departure from traditional stories is that there may be unknown, habitable lands upon this Earth. If there be such creatures, they must, if land-inhabiting, have a definite habitat somewhere; and, if in the annals of Arctic and Antarctic exploration there is no mention



LEFT: The letter from NEO-PTOLEMAIC that appeared in the *Melbourne Age* on 16 Sept 1933; was the letter writer the first forteen Down Under?

AFTER THE BOOK WAS PUBLISHED, HE BEGAN FIRING OFF LETTERS TO NEWSPAPERS IN SEARCH OF MATERIAL

of such monsters, and their breeding place, that place, if thinkable, must be considered undiscovered. [...] My own suspicion is that there are no undiscovered, monster-inhabited lands of this Earth. But to say that creatures from other worlds, perhaps from planets which may not be millions of miles away from this Earth, have fallen from the sky into this Earth’s oceans would bring upon me ridicule such as was poured upon Chladni when he asserted that meteorites had reached this Earth from outer space. [...] According to data that I have collected, creatures that cannot be traced to origin upon this Earth have appeared upon this Earth.” Fort asks readers to supply him with information about a Queensland monster which had been found dead on a beach.

He had already written to the *Brisbane Courier* two months earlier (26 Mar 1925), again asking readers to help him with material. Referring to sightings of sea-monsters and then to rains of living things, Fort states, “Because of these data, and many other data, it is my suspicion that living things have come to this Earth from other worlds, perhaps the visible planets, perhaps unknown, fertile regions in space. If anything of this kind could be widely accepted, there would be such a stimulus to explorers of this

Earth as has not excited imagination upon this Earth since the year 1492. If, perhaps, through zones, or currents, of warm air living things have come to this Earth from other worlds, one conceives that adventurers from this Earth could make return voyages. My desire is to make the widest possible collection of data upon this subject, and I shall be very much obliged if readers of the *Courier* can send me information.” Although these letters all outline the programme of *New Lands*, neither the book’s title, nor even the fact that he is an author, is mentioned.

Strangely enough, while sea-serpents play only a minor role in Fort’s work, they often appear in his letters written between *New Lands* and *Lo!* In the Hobart, Tasmania, *Mercury*, 21 Aug 1926, Fort mentions a Tasmanian sea-monster and a Patagonian plesiosaur, then concludes that “data have a way of appearing and then bounding away. Nevertheless, in this instance, it may be possible to capture some statements. If any reader of this newspaper knows anything of this reported occurrence, I shall be very much obliged if he will send information to me.”

And information he received – which led to his third and most all-encompassing work, *Lo!*, a book that glitters with uncertainties and ambiguities, poetry and aphorisms.

NOTES

1 See my article “Fort as a postmodern writer”, **FT395:55**.

2 Damon Knight, *Charles Fort: Prophet of the Unexplained*, Garden City, NY, Doubleday & Company, 1970, p. 168.

3 Jim Steinmeyer, *Charles Fort: The Man Who Invented the Supernatural*, TarcherPerigee, 2008, p.197.

4 *Ibid.*, p.198.

5 Catalog of Copyright Entries. Part 1. [A] Group 1. Books. New Series Library of Congress. Copyright Office 1923, p.1,104.

6 For Tarkington’s complete introduction, check the admirable critical edition of *New Lands* by Mr X, at www.resologist.net/lands205.htm.

7 Ulrich Magin, *Der Ritt auf dem Kometen – über Charles Fort*, Frankfurt: Zweitausendeins, 1997, p. 132, based on information supplied by Mr X.

8 Doug Skinner, “Doubting Tiffany”, **FT200:48-52**, 2005.

9 HP Lovecraft, *Selected Letters*, vol. II, Arkham House, p.174.

10 HP Lovecraft, *Selected Letters*, vol. III, p.135.

11 HP Lovecraft, *Selected Letters*, vol. V, p.172.

12 ST Joshi, *The Annotated HP Lovecraft*, Dell, 1997, p.112.

13 Ben Hecht, *1001 Afternoons in New York*, Viking Press, 1941, p.333.

➦ **ULRICH MAGIN** is a longtime contributor to FT and the author of *Investigating the Impossible* (2011). He lives in Germany.

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DR VERY STRANGELOVE

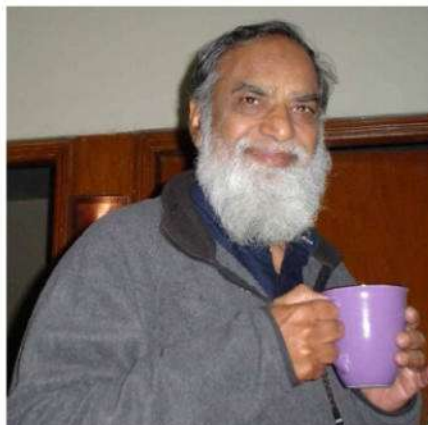
As *Oppenheimer* packs out cinemas worldwide, **SD TUCKER** rubs his lamp to release the spirit of Sultan Bashiruddin Mahmood, the Pakistani scientist who tried to create for his government an Islamically sound nuclear-programme by enslaving radioactive Koranic fire-demons...

Christopher Nolan's much-acclaimed summer blockbuster *Oppenheimer*, starring Cillian Murphy and his hat, tells the complex story of the great atomic physicist J Robert Oppenheimer and his successful quest to build the US an atom-bomb in 1945. In subsequent decades, several other nations have succeeded in splitting the atom too – including Pakistan, which first went nuclear in 1998. Every domestic A-bomb programme had its own specific internal methods of constructing such an awesomely powerful doomsday device, but one proposed Pakistani plan was unique: to exploit captured genies.

NO FIRE WITHOUT SMOKE?

Not merely the stuff of fictional *Arabian Nights* fairytales, genies – known in Muslim lands as *djinn/jinn* (plural) or *djinni/jinni* (singular) – are a standard element of belief in Islam (see FT147:30-33, 324:20-21). In the Koran, they are described as a race of spiritual beings akin to the Western fairies, shape-shifting humanoids inhabiting an invisible world parallel to our own. Some are good, and serve Allah, some are evil, and serve Iblis or al-Shaytan, the Islamic Devil. Others once served King Solomon, the wisest man of all, who could enslave them with his magic ring. At the dawn of Creation, it is said Allah created three distinct breeds of intelligent being: humans from clay, angels from light, and djinn from some mysterious substance called 'smokeless fire'. If you are a pious Koranic literalist of the old-school, you are doctrinally required to believe all this.¹

So, 'smokeless fire' – what could that be? How about nuclear power or plasma of some kind? They both burn extremely hot, without producing any visible plumes. As such, several scientifically minded Muslims in the post-Oppenheimer era have made serious attempts to prove genies are constructed neither of luminiferous ether or phlogiston, nor ectoplasm. Dr Ibrahim B Syed is a Kentucky-based, India-born, Clinical Professor of Nuclear Medicine (i.e. radiology) and former President of Islamic Research Foundation International. According to various iterations of his Wikipedia page, which I suspect may well have been written by a *djinni* under his direct command, Dr Syed is not only "the fastest typing champion in Ballari District, typing at the Speed of 100 words per minute with no mistakes", but also "the highest educated person in Louisville



WAS THE RISLEY ENTITY NO ALIEN, BUT A PROTOTYPE ATOMIC DJINNI?

and in the State of Kentucky", and even "perhaps the only highest educated Muslim in India" [sic – he or his *djinni* finally made a typo after all]. To prove his intellectual superiority over all Kentucky, Syed has produced a short paper, "The Jinn: A Scientific Analysis", which opens by stating the Koran's claims that men are made from clay and water by the Divine Hands of Allah "are scientifically correct" (perhaps he's thinking of Morph and Tony Hart).

Syed thinks genies are extraterrestrial beings who live in the Sun. As our Sun is fuelled by internal nuclear fusion reactions involving plasma, this means genies are inherently atomic in nature too. Syed says djinn are therefore ET "plasma-beasts", plasma being the 'fourth state of matter', neither solid, liquid, nor gas. It is a form of luminescent, superheated, ionised, gas-like substance present within the core of the Sun, "where the temperature reaches ten million degrees and the density is five times greater than solid gold". Here, nuclear reactions occur involving helium and hydrogen, their fusion visible down here as golden sunlight. As far as it is possible for those less educated than Dr Syed to follow his speedy typing, he

LEFT: Pakistan's own Dr Strangelove, Sultan Bashiruddin Mahmood, enjoying a nice cup of tea.

appears to feel that his posited *djinn* plasma-beasts, existing as complex "patterns of [sentient] magnetic force" inside our nearest star, feed off its nuclear reactions somehow. Thus, genies are actually solar-powered, like photosynthesising plants on the Earth below.²

ISLAM'S EVIL DJINNI-US

Other Muslim scientists claim *djinn* are not nuclear-powered, but potential sources of nuclear power in and of themselves. Exhibit A is Sultan Bashiruddin Mahmood, a leading light of Pakistan's post-war nuclear programmes. Joining the Pakistan Atomic Energy Commission (PAEC) in 1960, Mahmood spent most of the swinging Sixties studying and working at institutions linked to the University of Manchester, then one of the UK's leading atomic research centres... including, scarily, the affiliated plant at Risley near Warrington, the scene in 1978 of a famous encounter with an alleged silver-suited ET with deadly radioactive laser-beams for eyes, weapons of smokeless fire indeed (see FT397:36-41). Was this entity no alien at all, but a prototype atomic *djinni* conjured up years earlier by Mahmood during his British research-period?

Nobody ever dared ask him, as, being a hardline Islamist, Mahmood has been repeatedly linked to al-Qaeda's attempts to gain a radiological dirty-bomb during their period of shelter in Afghanistan under the Taliban, being alleged to have met Osama bin Laden personally, although he himself denies these charges. Following 9/11, Mahmood was arrested by the Pakistani government and handed a travel ban, lest he ever try to fly a magic carpet laden with plutonium into any tall buildings abroad. His opinion is that A-bombs belong to the entire Islamic ummah; once Pakistan had them, he thought they should give the blueprints away to all Muslims everywhere, thereby guaranteeing Islam would dominate the world... or blow it up.

His book *Doomsday and Life After Death* argues that the Armageddon/Al-Malhama Al-Kubra mentioned in Bible and Koran alike may come via atomic means. According to his *Cosmology and Human Destiny*, sunspots



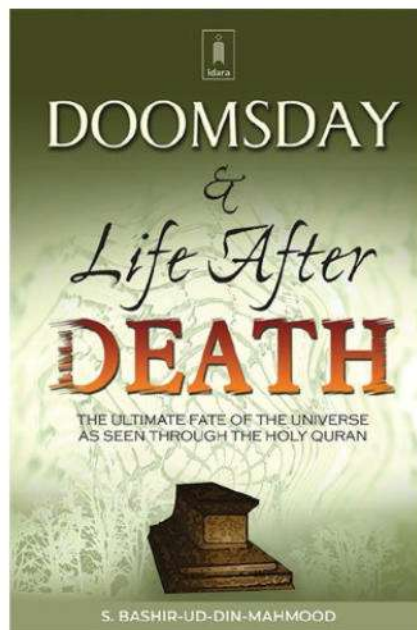
ABOVE LEFT: Dr Ibrahim B Syed, djinn theorist and “the highest educated person in Louisville and in the State of Kentucky”. ABOVE RIGHT: General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq planned to bring science under sharia law. BELOW: Mahmood’s book floated the idea that the biblical/koranic Armageddon could come as the result of a nuclear conflagration.

(*djinn*-flares, maybe?) fry the brains of humans down below, making them declare war during times of high solar activity – and, today, many of these brain-fried humans – like Biden, Kim and Putin – have nukes. Mahmood’s book predicted possible Sun-stoked nuclear war between India and Pakistan in 2002, thankfully incorrectly.

BAD DJINN-FLUENCE

All this has earned him the soubriquet ‘Pakistan’s Dr Strangelove’, but in fact Big-Beard Mahmood did know his electrons from his neutrons, having developed a successful ‘SBM Probe’ (his initials, although he claimed to get most of his ideas direct from Allah) to detect leaks in atomic power-plant steam-pipes. He was both a senior engineer at Karachi Nuclear Power-Plant and directly involved in the Pakistani government’s attempts to enrich uranium from the 1970s onwards. Mahmood may sound like the worst nuclear power-plant employee since Homer Simpson, but not within a specific Pakistani context. From 1977-1988, Pakistan was ruled by its very own evil Mr Burns in the shape of the fundamentalist military dictator General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq, who wished to forcibly Islamise every aspect of national society under sharia law, science included.

Zia-ul-Haq funded special ‘Islamic Science’ conferences at which some very weird ideas were put forward – mountains were giant nails or tent-pegs used by Allah to pin the Earth down so it didn’t blow away in high winds; the Koran secretly contained the correct chemical formula for milk; special Islamic equations existed to accurately calculate the amount of hypocrisy in any given nation; special hollow artillery shells



were urgently needed to kill genies in case of future war with the *Djinn* Kingdom... that kind of thing.

Mahmood himself apparently delivered a paper arguing that as smokeless fire-genies were clearly nuclear, they should be captured and used to power bombs and reactors. So powerful were these beings, Mahmood is supposed to have said (he sometimes denies the whole thing), that enslaving a single one within the restrictive chains of the national power-grid would be enough to electrify the whole of Pakistan. The unfortunate nuclear *djinni* of tomorrow would not merely be confined within a lamp, he would be powering millions more of them.³

SPINNING DJINNI

How could such ideas be taken seriously? One man with an answer is Dr Pervez Hoodbhoy, a Pakistani scientist and noted media rationalist and debunker. Hoodbhoy was involved in a public dispute with Mahmood in 1988, keeping a close eye on his antics since. Thankfully, some Pakistani PAEC scientists today now agree with Hoodbhoy’s highly sceptical view of Mahmood’s teachings. In 2017, he received a letter from one PAEC official rubbing Mahmood’s nuclear-djinn ideas as implausible. He said it would be much simpler to tie some genies up to wind-turbines to spin their blades around as a Greener alternative instead! For the PAEC man, this was how King Solomon had once powered his own ancient kingdom. Is this how he excavated all those famous mines?

Hoodbhoy has further pointed to a 2012 scandal in which a random citizen, Agha Wathar Pathan (or Agha Waqar Ahmad – see FT294:22) gained explicit support of both Cabinet politicians and the famed ‘Father of the Pakistani Bomb’ Dr Abdul Qadeer Khan (the true Islamic Oppenheimer) after boasting of inventing a magic car which ran purely on water, no petrol needed; this hydro-engine could also be adapted to power the wider national grid, thanks to certain conveniently “undisclosed calculations”. Hoodbhoy alleges Mr Mathan/Ahmad turned out to be a bankrobber – no wonder he changed tack to con-artistry, if his getaway cars were full of nothing but tap-water.

In 1998, meanwhile, whilst supervising a nuclear test in Balochistan, another top PAEC official, Samar Mubarak Mand, reportedly claimed to have discovered a



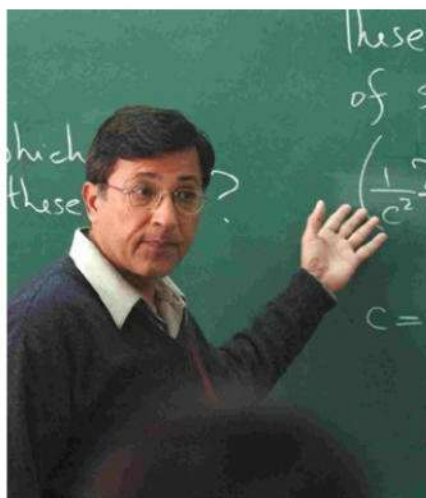
haunted kitchen-pot which could produce infinite numbers of cooked chickens without ever becoming exhausted, by the infinite mercy of Allah; he only put five birds in, but got 183 out. This, Hoodbhoy says, is the true long-term social effect of Zia-ul-Haq's programme to develop a new scientific non-field of 'Jinn Chemistry' with Mahmood's help in the 1970s and 1980s: a credulous belief in the existence of genie-powered perpetual motion, wonder-fuels and literal cornucopias.

ISLAMABAD KINGDOM BRUNEL

Zia-ul-Haq's wider plan involved letting fellow ideological-obsessives seize control of the nation's schools, universities and scientific institutions and limiting access to jobs only to those who either actually believed in radical Islam and its superiority over Western science, or at least pretended they did. Applicants for scientific posts now suddenly found themselves answering interview questions about the 99 Holy Names of Allah rather than the 118 elements of the Periodic Table.

Curriculum guidance was rewritten to say things like: "Effect must not be related to physical cause. To do so leads towards atheism... It is un-Islamic to teach that mixing hydrogen with oxygen automatically produces water. The Islamic way is this: when atoms of hydrogen approach atoms of oxygen, then by the will of God, water is produced." Equally, "No laws or principles should be named after [Western] scientists. For example, it is un-Islamic to speak of Newton's laws, Boyle's Laws, and so on, because this is tantamount to shirk [idolatry of infidels]." Instead, "the Greeks do not deserve credit" for anything, and the pretence had to be maintained that Muslim 'scientists' like King Solomon had discovered everything worth knowing instead, even when this amounted to totally falsifying history. By this logic, Muhammad himself was really just a talented civil engineer despite his publicly demonstrated ability to move large mountains. In other words, the religious zealots who had seized control of society set out to 'decolonise the entire curriculum'. (Sound familiar?) The Islamists even exploited the deconstructionist techniques of Far-Left Western proponents of Critical Theory taught in our own colleges today to aid this process.

The end result was that you got men like Dr Safdar Rajput appointed to Pakistan's Defence Science and Technology Organisation military R&D unit, who could publish special papers on "jinnology", arriving at the following conclusions: "It is highly probable that the origin of jinns is methane gas, together with other saturated hydrocarbons, because these yield a smokeless flame upon burning... [as genies look like human beings, and can even mate



with them, but are actually evil demons] I cannot help but say that the jinns are the white races."⁴

How long before we end up being sold genie-powered turbines as a plausible solution to our current energy-crises over here, too? No electricity left because the mad politicians closed down all the oil-fields? Never mind, just tie Will Smith to a big windmill and tell him to start puffing.

A MOTHER'S GLOVE

Lest you think this is all purely an Islamist issue, certain infidel Western scientists like David Bohm have also claimed plasma might enjoy some kind of sentience; see a fascinating essay by FT's very own Paul Devereux, "The Fourth State: Does Lightning Think?" in *Strange Attractor Journal Four*, 2011, pp.130-9. Devereux relates such ideas back to his own expert field of Earthlights, some of which do indeed appear to interact with humans in a seemingly intelligent fashion. ETs have likewise often been linked to these subjects. Former *Flying Saucer Review* editor Gordon Creighton concluded saucers were piloted by demonic *djinn*; you could also read paranormal plasma-researcher Jay Alfred's online 2008 essay "Jinns - Plasma Aliens From a Parallel Earth" online at <https://ezinearticles.com/?Jinns--Plasma-Aliens-From-a-Parallel-Earth&id=1293623>.

Meanwhile, a very learned 1980s essay by another one-time FT writer, Dennis Stillings, "Meditations On the Atom and Time", explores Oppenheimer's creation of the bomb from a mythopoetic perspective. He notes various curious atomic coincidences (or synchronicities, in the Jungian sense), such as the strange fact Oppenheimer's mother Ella was born without a full left hand, necessitating her always wearing a Dr Strangelove-style glove in public. Stillings shows how the image of the handless mother, whose appendage is chopped off by her Promethean son, is directly echoed within alchemy. Here, the son is the alchemist, and

LEFT: Dr Pervez Hoodbhoy has been busily debunking the world of the Islamic pseudo-scientists.

the mother the *prima materia*, or 'primal/first matter', which the alchemist seeks to transform into spiritual gold in his lab ('materia' comes from the Latin 'mater', meaning 'mother'). To (radioactively?) transmute base matter into gold, the alchemist has to chop up and mutilate his own metaphorical mater in his forges and vessels; and to transform his own 1940s geopolitical world, Oppenheimer had also to enable its own potential mutilation or obliteration during the Cold War nuclear stand-off between White House and Kremlin.⁵

As I have recently shown myself in an essay elsewhere (go to <https://providencemag.com> and look for 'God or Godzilla?'), Stillings' essay possibly influenced both David Lynch, who had his murderous demon 'Killer Bob' unleashed onto humanity by Bob Oppenheimer's Faustian actions in *Twin Peaks*, and James Shelby Downard, a paranoid US conspiracy theorist who also thought the A-bomb had quite literally released a malign Mephisto-like genie from its bottle out in the New Mexico desert ('The Bottle' being the nickname of a container for one of the real Killer Bob's early A-bomb mechanisms).

NOTES

¹ Robert Lebling, *Legends of the Fire Spirits: Jinn and Genies from Arabia to Zanzibar*, IB Tauris, 2010, pp.1-5.

² www.lebling.com/2010/05/25/jinn-a-scientific-analysis/; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ibrahim_B._Syed (The version of this last website I accessed has since been slightly altered to make Syed's speed-typing achievements sound a bit less silly, sadly)

³ *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* Vol.59, No.2, Mar/Apr 2003, pp.49-55; www.newsweekpakistan.com/why-pakistan-keeps-the-world-up-at-night/; www.haaretz.com/2011-11-09/ty-article/pakistans-dr-strangelove/0000017fe71fd97e-a37f-f77f1ae200000; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sultan_Bashiruddin_Mahmood

⁴ Pervez Hoodbhoy, *Islam and Science: The Battle for Rationality*, Zed Books, 1991, pp.34-55, 140-54; <https://newsline magazine.com/magazine/science-refuses-take-root-muslim-countries-dr-pervez-hoodbhoy/>; <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/the-religious-scientist/>; <https://gulfnews.com/lifestyle/pakistans-pseudoscience-menace-1.1927430>; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Agha_Waqar%27s_water-fuelled_car

⁵ See Adam Parfrey, Ed., *Apocalypse Culture*, Feral House, 1990, pp.328-351.

♦ SD TUCKER is an FT regular whose next book, *Hitler's and Stalin's Misuse of Science: When Science Fiction Was Turned Into Science Fact by the Nazis and the Soviets* (Pen & Sword/Frontline) is due out in Oct 2023. His own favourite genie is Shantae.



Veering off the old beaten track

As there is no manifesto for the somewhat hazy field of folk horror, this multi-contributor book is useful for offering different opinions from different viewpoints, says **Andy Paciorek**

Folk Horror

New Global Pathways

ed. Dawn Keetley & Ruth Heholt

University of Wales Press 2023

Pb, 280pp, £50, ISBN 9781786839794

Perhaps of all the literary, cinematic and stylistic manifestations of the “dark arts”, only Film/Roman Noir rivals folk horror in the quantity of deliberation, discussion, debate and disagreement. Indeed in discussion of the latter subject on social media, the question “But is it Folk Horror?” is frequently asked in regards to a particular movie, book or image. Sometimes this elicits the response of the “Folk Horror Police” – fans who over-rigorously express their opinion.

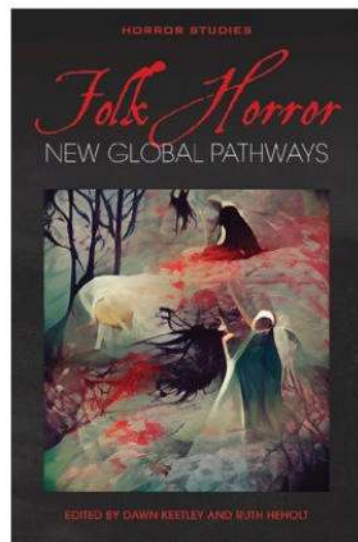
“Opinion” is the key word however for there is no manifesto for folk horror – it is a mode named after the initial event. Adam Scovell’s “Folk Horror Chain” acts as an excellent reference point for recognising commonly recurring elements (Landscape. Isolation. Skewed Belief System. Summoning or Happening) but it’s a guide, not a mandatory tick box – there is still scope for deviation and room for differing opinions. Therefore multi-contributor books such as *Folk Horror: New Global Pathways* are extremely useful in this sometimes hazy field as they present a variety of opinions stemming from various different viewpoints, specific subject-matter and importantly from different cultures.

While the 1960s/70s British cinematic triumvirate of *Witchfinder General*, *Blood On Satan’s Claw* and *The Wicker Man* have been written about extensively previously as they are important fixtures in the subject, folk horror is a form of narrative and

aesthetic apparent in probably all cultures, so it is good that this book does veer off the old beaten track.

It wanders into diverse terrain ranging from Scooby Doo cartoons, typography, the short stories of EF Benson, occulture, video games and dark tourism in Lancashire to the representations and relationships of folk horror in the cinema and culture of Mexico, Italy, Ukraine, Thailand and Appalachia.

Inevitably, politics do arise in the discussion. Horror fiction analysis can often be examined under a sociopolitical lens as a lot can be told about a people by



looking at what scares them – be it post-war trauma in the early 20th-century Europe, atomic/alien fears of 1950s America, generational counterculture/mainstream conflicts in the 1960s and 1970s to the uncertain polarised times we currently live in. Folk horror is particularly laden with such considerations and this book does explore issues such as colonialism, sexuality and agrarian/industrial conflict.

The question ‘But is it Folk Horror?’ sometimes elicits the response of the ‘Folk Horror Police’

Actually, regarding traditional vs technological conflict, I was disappointed to see that AI-generated imagery was used for the cover – especially as the book itself notes the connection between handicraft and folk horror. It would have been far more appropriate to have used imagery by an actual artist – be it centuries-old chapbook illustration, a still from a relevant film or a piece by one of the many creatives currently working in the subject field, rather than using generative text.

Back to the actual text, in which many examples of folk horror fiction are addressed, some familiar and others more obscure. I was particularly pleased to see the writing of actor-turned-author Thomas Tryon get good coverage as his work in the field is too often overlooked.

Some less familiar works such as the films *Jug Face* and *The House With the Laughing Windows* are also given more attention than they usually get.

However, I was surprised to see Robert Eggar’s *The Witch* get such scant attention, particularly in discussions of the folkloresque, as it’s a good example of new folk horror using authentic old folklore in its narrative, considering that there is numerous referencing of Ari Aster’s *Midsommar* – a film that I seem to be in the minority of personally finding both overrated and underwhelming.

Of fortean interest, the book discusses the folkloric entities La Llorona and Phi Pop, ritual sacrifice and the occult revival in relation to the influence, inspiration and development of folk horror. Catherine Spooner investigates how the 1612 Witch Trials have been represented contemporarily, including the 1987 documentary *Lucifer Over Lancashire*, the 1612 *Underture*, a concept album by the Eccentric Research Council featuring actress Maxine Peake – and even the local real ales Black Cat and Pendle Witch. Local tourism faces the issue of making the history enticing while remembering that 11 people were executed. Spooner comments that “there are few specific locations associated with the witches and therefore they come to be diffused into the landscape, as a kind of ‘Spirit of Place’”.

The area around Pendle Hill and Lancaster does have an ambience that lends itself well to one of Britain’s best documented and fascinating historical witchcraft narratives. It’s a case that has been dramatised in numerous ways, even tangentially in a *Doctor Who* episode, but which deserves a better film treatment than the 1976 TV film and the dramatised segments of the 2011 *Pendle Witch Child* documentary.

As a multi-contributor book, some chapters will be of differing interest to individual readers and the style of writing can vary, but it holds together very well. It is an academic book (as evidenced by its hefty University Press price tag) but much of it is written with an apparent enthusiasm for the subject that enables it to flow fluently, making it readable to a wider audience with an interest in this particular field.

★★★

Follies in our landscape

Nigel Watson delights in a wonderland of fantasy, eccentricity and imagination

The Story of Follies

Architectures of Eccentricity

Celia Fisher

Reaktion Books 2022

Hb, 408pp, £35, ISBN 9781789146356

Most of us, if we think about it all, assume a folly is just an ornamental garden decoration built by aristocratic landowners in the past. Celia Fisher calls them buildings that “embody ... a ... mixture of aspiration and fallibility” and finds it difficult to give a precise definition for them.

Considering they are often built to be surprising, fun and extravagant with no specific purpose, it is no surprise that the word folly comes from the French word for madness. Yet, follies often serve as places for eating, musical entertainment, watching sports and hunts, housing collections of shells and fossils, or as somewhere to contemplate nature in a grand landscape.

To help pin down what follies are, Fisher explores their origin, how they tell a story in the landscape, their relation to husbandry and fishing, as monuments to local heroes and victories, as waterside attractions and grottos, the influences of the East, Gothic and Picturesque on their construction, and the continuing construction of follies throughout the world.

From a fortaean point of view they have been built to create a sense of theatre and to turn a landscape into a wonderland of fantasy, eccentricity and imagination. A good example is that of the fantasy garden

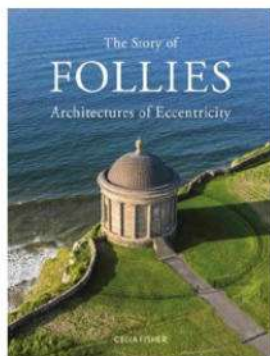
created by Vicino Orsini, Duke of Bomarzo, in the mid-16th century. Surrounding the family castle in Bomarzo, Italy, there already existed numerous Etruscan remains that included a stepped pyramid, tombs and sacrificial altars that proved a perfect place to add further embellishments. It was only after the death of his wife in 1560 that he turned his gardens into a doom-laden memorial to her. One gateway is guarded by two sphinxes that carry enigmatic inscriptions; beyond them the Casa Pendente folly lists at a 30 degree angle to create the lightning struck tower in the Tarot pack. Next to it is a mock amphitheatre containing a labyrinth and a nightmarish-looking Hell’s Mouth folly with a banqueting hall beyond its mouth-like entrance. Pathways lead past dragons and scenes of warfare to a classically designed Temple of Eternity. As Fisher puts it, you end up in a place of tranquillity after traversing the monstrosities and psychosis of the journey.

Some follies are linked with local folklore, as in Painswick, Gloucestershire, where a Pan’s Lodge was built as a nod to the annual Pan procession to Hyett’s Woods. Elsewhere, at West Wycombe, Buckinghamshire, Sir Francis Dashwood built transgressive follies filled with erotic

innuendos and he used local labour to excavate the Hell Fire Caves where Black Masses were rumoured to be practised.

This is a scholarly, sumptuously illustrated book, with extensive references, a further reading list and an index, which perfectly shows how human folly of all kinds is etched into our landscape.

★★★★★



Dice Men

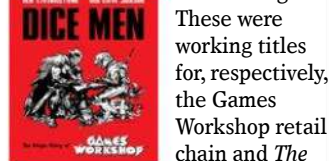
The Origin Story of Games Workshop

Ian Livingstone with Steve Jackson

Unbound 2022

Hb, 224pp, £30, ISBN 9781800180529

Imagine a parallel universe where every British high street boasts its own Quasigamic Expedition shop, piled high with copies of chart-topping game-book *The Magic Quest*. It’s these tiny glimpses into an alternative history of role-playing that help make Ian Livingstone’s memoir



such a delight. These were working titles for, respectively, the Games Workshop retail chain and *The Warlock of Firetop Mountain*: the latter, of course, being the first instalment of the million-selling Fighting Fantasy range. And Livingstone’s journey to such literary and entrepreneurial heights is extraordinary. An academic under-achiever from a Rusholme terrace, he teamed up with schoolmate Steve Jackson to single-handedly (well, double-handedly) create, define and dominate the British gaming industry. Games Workshop, *White Dwarf* magazine, Citadel Miniatures, *Warhammer* RPG, *Fighting Fantasy*... it’s a giddy multiple whammy of success.

But despite the glories, Livingstone has never renounced his geeky roots. The proof? He keeps *everything*. And it’s all here. Every cover of the duo’s hand-typed mid-1970s gaming fanzine *Owl & Weasel*, complete with Livingstone’s own Robert Crumb-inspired drawings. A 1975 biro-drawn map to “The Inner Temple of the Golden Skeleton”, from their first-ever crack at running a *Dungeons and Dragons* campaign. Photos of an extraordinary, Gerald Ford-era US road trip to meet D&D creator Gary Gygax, with Livingstone a dead ringer for the young Richard Dreyfuss. The images alone make it a five-star purchase, an immersive visual record of a birthing process steeped in cow gum and Letraset.

Jackson and his fellow Games Workshop alumni contribute a smattering of heartwarming memories, but it’s Livingstone’s book and his style is splendidly

wry. The joy is in the early years, in Livingstone and Jackson using a parked van as home, sleeping outside an office so tiny it was nicknamed “The Breadbin”. Glorious details are dropped with deadpan wit: the Newark canal presumably still filled with early rejects from the Citadel Miniatures factory; the ill-fated campaign to make a success of Andrew Lloyd-Webber’s unlikely insurance-based RPG, *Calamity*. And hilariously, *everything* becomes a game. Even the office shrink-wrapping machine inspires a competition to pass larger and larger items of food through its mechanism... the winner, splendidly, being an unbroken fried egg. Through it all, the duo’s passion – and their friendship – is never tarnished, even in the face of Evangelical Christian protests that their predilection for fantastical derring-do is a gateway to adolescent Satanism. It’s an inspiring story for any budding geek with a burning ambition.

Bob Fischer

★★★★★

The Magick of Matter

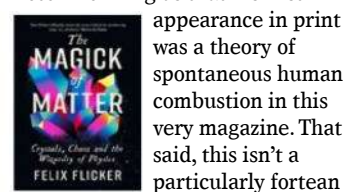
Crystals, Chaos and the Wizardry of Physics

Felix Flicker

Profile Books 2023

Pb, 336pp, £10.99, ISBN 9781788167499

Perhaps the most intriguing revelation from Oxford physics graduate Felix Flicker comes in a footnote informing us that his first



appearance in print was a theory of spontaneous human combustion in this very magazine. That said, this isn’t a particularly fortaean book. From the title you might expect something in the vein of *The Tao of Physics* by Fritjof Capra (whose glowing endorsement appears on the back of the book), drawing parallels between modern physics and older, pre-scientific traditions. In a sense that’s what this is, except that Flicker focuses predominantly on the popular image of wizardry as portrayed in Harry Potter-style fantasy fiction, at the expense of actual schools of thought in the real world. And unlike most books of this kind, he eschews the more obviously mystical aspects of physics – the Big Bang, wormholes, Schrodin-



ger's cat and so forth – in favour of more practical applications.

This still leaves room for some pretty weird physics, from magnetic levitation to time dilation and quantum teleportation. A lot of the book, however, deals with more mundane wizardry, such as the physics of LEDs. These are basically tiny crystals of silicon that can be made to emit a bright beam of light – honest-to-goodness “magic crystals” that we all take for granted! He's done a commendable job in bringing such topics to life, through a series of analogies with the “exciting” world of magic.

What I found frustrating, however, was his reluctance to confront the numerous differences between the scientific method and magical thinking. People like Aleister Crowley and Uri Geller, to name just two, have made claims for magic(k) that most scientists would say are downright impossible. If Flicker had chosen to address the various pros and cons of such claims, this might have been a first-rate book for fortune tellers. As it is, it's still first-rate, but really only for dedicated popular science readers.

Andrew May

★★★★★

Night Terrors

Troubled Sleep and the Stories We Tell About It

Alice Vernon

Icon Books 2022

Hb, 272pp, £16.99, ISBN 9781785787935

Alice Vernon's focus is weird sleep, the disturbed and disturbing kind, and her speciality is what dreams say, how they say it, and the soliloquies we sometimes blurt out in the middle of a dream. Like Mina in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, she admits her longing “to sleep naturally”, but in *Night Terrors* she aims chiefly at what dreams tell us about ourselves, especially the things we would rather not know.

A lecturer in creative writing at Aberystwyth University, Vernon draws from a lifetime of scientific inquisitiveness, well-honed skills in storytelling and genuine affection for pre-21st-century human beings as she offers a generous taxonomy of the fascinating family of parasomnias and a lively review of the equally

fascinating crew of expert and eccentric dream interpreters. Chapters concentrate on sleepwalking, hypnopompic hallucinations, sleep paralysis, night terrors, lucid dreaming and the links between dreams and the narratives of myth, film, fiction and video games. Vernon's subjects include the usual suspects, plus topics such as Covid-19 dreaming,



PTSD therapy, astral bodies, coulrophobia (fear of clowns) and the Victorian penchant for the slinky female somnambulist clad in windswept chemise. Her sources include the latest clinical research, as well as deliciously dubious classics such as *An Essay on the Incubus* (1753) and *Historical, Physiological and Theological Treatise of Spirits, Apparitions, Witchcrafts, and Other Magical Practices* (1705). Freud receives fewer than 15 pages of fame. Jung is conspicuously absent.

Vernon's principal informant is herself. A veteran oneironaut, she has logged a remarkable record of sleepwalking hours and knows the anxiety of waking up to a potential crime scene every morning. Readers learn about her fear of aliens, her creepy tin man dreams, her “Nordic heavy metal” anger dreams, her love of Bette Davis and her many attempts at nocturnal hygiene.

A welcome addition to the vast library it cites and celebrates, Vernon's work is a compelling guide to the uncanny grammar of our dread and desire.

Peter A Huff

★★★★★

The Butterflies of Thantos

DA Chitty ed. David Alexander Hajducki

Anoetia Press 2022

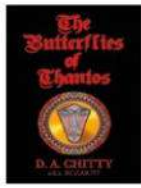
Hb, 333pp, £32.50, ISBN 9781399924399

Originally published in 1983, *The Butterflies of Thantos* is a curious and somewhat bewildering work; part memoir and celebration of the author's rich inner life, the amalgam therein comprises aphoristic insights, poetry, collage and mystical speculation.

Educated at King's College, Gloucester, Chitty (aka Rozar 777, 1937-2022) decamps to Paris

in 1954 to study painting only to pursue military service during the Cyprus Emergency (1955-1959) a year later. Based between London and the South of France, he establishes himself as an artist and is soon introduced to a decidedly countercultural coterie by poet William Curtis-Hayward (1931-1968). It is through Hayward that he meets Crowley confidante Gerald Yorke (1901-1983) and Thelemic filmmaker Kenneth Anger (1927-2023). It comes as no surprise then that he drifts towards magic and finds a home within the Typhonian Tradition of Kenneth Grant (1924-2011).

Given a positive reception by such figures as occult fanboy Jimmy Page and William Burroughs (1914-1997), *Thantos* also prompted an interest in Chitty's screenplays and his unique worldview. The Hollywood producer Robert Watts (*Star Wars*, *Indiana Jones*) was so impressed with the screenplay *Taxi Driver and the Star Caged Venus* that he optioned the work. With a thumbs-up from *éminence grise* of the weird and wonderful, Kenneth



Grant – the letter is included in the current edition – Chitty's work found many champions and was given an A-list provenance.

Comprising two baroquely titled sections – “The Butterflies of Thantos” and “Black Efforts Towards a Conscious Madness”, Chitty attempts to guide the reader through the Rainbow Cloud Gate into a realm of pure being. Having encountered the Primordial Child of the Cosmos in his early life, Chitty feels able to facilitate other seekers in their quest for enlightenment. The first trip can be seen as a qabalistic prose poem accompanied by his magico-cosmic collages that put one in touch with what lies beyond the veil of material reality. The second, a sequence of exploratory aphorisms and poetic discourse, provides a roadmap to psychic dissolution and cosmic reintegration.

As with any other work that suggests mystical outcomes, the arcane and unwieldy language of revelation may be off-putting and its internal stylistics unnecessarily obscure. That said, for genuine seekers it may contain something of interest

but personally I see its value as that of an eccentric document within the canon of “outsider” spirituality.

Chris Hill

★★★★★

The Madman's Gallery

The Strangest Paintings, Sculptures and Other Curiosities From the History of Art

Edward Brooke-Hitching

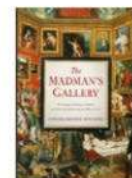
Simon & Schuster 2022

Hb, 256pp, £30, ISBN 9781398503571

The Madman's Gallery, the latest collection of the weird and wonderful by Edward Brooke-Hitching, is a “hypothetical gallery of curiosities”. It focuses, the author says, on “the oddities, the forgotten, the freakish, all with stories that offer glimpses of the lives of their creators and their eras”. That's a pretty wide remit, and perhaps too wide; unlike his previous books there's no structure to this one, beyond some 60 works of art in chronological order from a fertility figure dating to 38,000 BC to AI-generated art today.

There are plenty of very familiar paintings: Hieronymus Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights*, Quinten Massys's *Ugly Duchess*, Arcimboldo's portraits made up of fruit and veg, Piranesi's imaginary prisons, Fuselli's *Nightmare*, a Richard Dadd fairy painting and more.

But many of the remainder seem neither odd, nor forgotten, nor particularly freakish. Obviously they are the author's selection, but in too many cases one is left wondering why, despite the informative and enter-



taining commentary. Only two that were new to me leapt out as fascinating: a nude (or at least topless)

Mona Lisa – apparently there are about 20 of them, but this one was by a troublesome (but beautiful) apprentice of Leonardo nicknamed ‘Salai’ (the Devil or the Little Unclean One); and an astonishing *trompe l'oeil* by a Spanish painter, Per Borrell del Caso, of a boy climbing out of a picture frame. Otherwise, slightly disappointing.

Jay Vickers

★★★★★

West country folklore

Helen Cornish finds that folklore is still alive and kicking in two collections on the legends, tales and traditions of Devon and Cornwall

The Folklore of Cornwall

The Oral Tradition of a Celtic Nation

Ronald M James

University of Exeter Press 2022

Pb, 256pp, £25, ISBN 9781804130735

The Folklore of Devon

Mark Norman

University of Exeter Press 2023

Hb, 238pp, £45, ISBN 9781804130360

What joy! Two collections on British West Country folklore – specifically Cornwall and Devon – that situate folklore in the 21st century. Both published by the University of Exeter Press, who know when they are on to a good thing. The first, *The Folklore of Cornwall* by Ronald M James, an American with a long academic career as a folklorist and historian, and a Bard of the Gorsedh Kernow, inspired Mark Norman to compile the second, *The Folklore of Devon*, which updated Ralph Whitlock's 1977 collection. Norman, a popular writer and podcaster, is the Devon Folklore Recorder, and founded an archive. Their different trajectories demonstrate distinct skills and perspectives. They share common goals: to draw attention to marginalised stories and collectors, to highlight distinctive elements, and to demonstrate how traditions are always in flux. Both are welcome additions to the literature.

Both books start with an overview of 19th and 20th century folklorists. These researchers, and they are plentiful, contributed to establishing the discipline through vernacular and oral collections that now constitute key archival sources: Hunt, Hawker and Payton dominate the Cornish landscape; King, Bray and Brown work alongside official Recorders in Devon; Sabine Baring-Gould crosses the borders. Both trace the ebbs and

flows of academic and popular folklore. James shows how folklore was refashioned in mid-century America; Norman notes that, once pushed to the margins, UK folklore and the Folklore Society have found renewed vigour. Both urge the reader to recognise how folklore is made and remade in the present, and show how contemporary stories are reconfigured in new contexts. The Black Dog continues to prowl the rural Devonshire landscape while the Internet offers new audiences and platforms. Diasporic mining communities in California find Cornish Knockers in their underground worlds.

Once histories and collectors are established, the publications move on to more thematic analyses. James considers how Cornish stories were disseminated through earlier Droll Tellers (itinerant storytellers) and contextualised by folkways, everyday rhymes and traditions. The remaining chapters take up Piskies, Mermaids, Giants and Spectre Bridegroom tales. James skilfully moves between micro and macro perspectives to demonstrate how Cornish tales echo those found across Northern Europe or the Celtic Nations. Familiar themes demonstrate a distinctive Cornish specificity shaped by its topography, industry and coastal history. Stories are mapped with detailed attention to motifs and the Folklore Index, with a helpful Type Index for Cornish Narrative appended. This structured approach

may feel repetitive to readers unfamiliar with the motif classifications but provides space to relate old and renewed tales that span the Cornish land.

After outlining key collectors and writers who contributed to the county's significant archives, Norman takes us straight into Devonshire stories inspired by

the rural landscape and seasonal rhythms: Moors, Calendar Year, Farming and the Weather, before turning to the supernatural to consider the Devil, Fairies, Hauntings, the Black Dog and Witchcraft. He follows Whitlock's earlier structure, at greater length and detail, with an additional chapter for Modern Folklore. He proposes a comparative perspective, but in practice is often more interested in testing the veracity of folkloric accounts against the empirical record. The final chapter brings these up to date through the global platform offered through the Internet, such as #folklorethursday, and the value of his archive and podcast, all of which highlight Norman's passion for the creati-



ity of folklore and its storytelling possibilities.

Both authors direct our attention to the sprawling and multiple ways that folklore is very much alive and kicking, as responses to the modern world as much as the past. They track how daily practices in rural and coastal lives are shaped by and reflect folklore. At the same time, vernacular stories persistently weave in supernatural occurrences and encounters with other-than-human worlds, as vibrant elements of cultural territory. Given the emphasis on the vibrancy of the present in shaping relevant pasts, it is interesting to note the chronological shape of both books and the contemporary cover images that fix folklore in the past.

I recommend both, although academic presses are expensive. It is a treat to have West Country tales, legends, and traditions comprehensively covered, and be shown distinctive ways in which folklore can be contextualised, made relevant and retold.

James ★★★★★

Norman ★★★★★

An Admirable Point

A Brief History of the Exclamation Mark

Florence Hazrat

Profile Books 2022

Hb, 176pp, £12.99, ISBN 9781800811973

Florence Hazrat records in this book the history of the screamer – the punctuation mark of doom! It's small and elegant, its yellow cover punched with a cut-out ! that shows a purple inner lining (colour code for hazardous



chemicals). It's accessibly written, with an academic flavour, and will attract nervous punctuators.

Is ending a sentence with ! like laughing at your own jokes? And what about social media LOL!!!! OMG????? Donald Trump is fond of a !, especially when signing off with "Nice!", "Sad!" or "Terrible!". Hazrat says the practice builds "chummy rapport" with followers. Apt!

Punctuation guides appeared from the 16th century, becoming more prescriptive. In the 20th century Henry and Francis Fowler (*The King's English*) thought that "excessive use of exclamation marks is ... one of the things that betray the uneducated". Anglo-Saxon scholar Eric Weiskott calls the ! "excitable", 'screechy' and 'frenetic' – he objected to its presence in translations of *Beowulf* (700-1000).

Several pundits dreamed up new marks, like the interrobang, a combined ? and !. (Suggested names included the exclamaquest, QuizDing and exclorative.) However, emojis have taken over the job of expressing shades of emotion or opinion (wink, grimace, clown).

Hazrat likes a bit of ambiguity, and is firmly on the side of the !, preferring language's "contradictory carnival of meaning" and "joyful jungle" to the "vitriol against exclamation marks [that] abounds in grammars and style guides".

As an historian of punctuation, Hazrat must have read many inflexible guides. Who can blame her for loving the liberated !? "Can we maybe even dance ecstatically in the exuberance of off-limit impossibility?" she asks. Why not?!

Lucy Fisher

★★★★★

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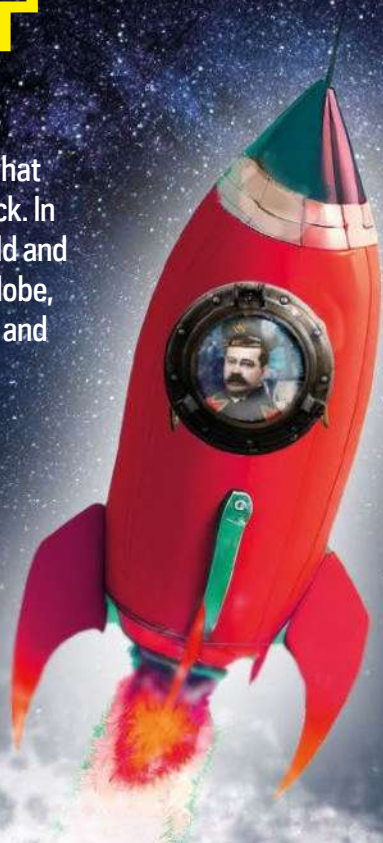
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Well worth every penny

It's back to the Seventies with eye-popping restorations of two TV series that pitted technologically-enhanced Steve Rogers and Jamie Summers against Bigfoot, aliens and power-crazed cyborgs



The Six Million Dollar Man / The Bionic Woman

Dir various, US 1973-1978
Fabulous Films, £249.99/£149.99

A casual visit to schools of the mid-1970s may have prompted alarm. Kids had started running and jumping in fake slow motion while staring at each other, through one eye and making 'dit-dit-dit' sounds. Was it mass hysteria? In some ways, yes. They were playing *The Six Million Dollar Man* and *The Bionic Woman* off the telly. This was an actual cultural phenomenon, spawning a spin-off series, three TV movies, tons of toys and merchandise and a generation of kids whose weedy playground athleticism turned instantly epic through a few funny noises and some weird crouching on low walls.

Now Fabulous Films have unleashed it all in two heaving collections so exhaustive I half expected Lindsay Wagner's home address to be tucked inside. *The Six Million Dollar Man* is the biggest set, clocking in at a

To think that people watched this on a murky analogue TV set...

thumping 34 discs... though if the action sequences weren't in slow-motion, it'd be 21 discs or less. I'm a tad too young to have seen any of it (to me, Lee Majors is *The Fall Guy*), but even fresh eyes found both sets a delight.

It starts with three TV movies where toothpick-chewing toughnut Steve Austin crashes a NASA test flight. He loses two legs, his left arm and his left eye. It's no biggie, though, because (in the most famous quote of the show) "We can rebuild him. We have the technology. We can make him better than he was. Better... stronger... faster"

And grumpier, too, since the first movie is a grounded, solemn affair. Austin spends most of it like a sexy Frankenstein's monster, depressed and disgusted at his nuclear-powered

limbs. The first three films feel connected to the source material—the 1972 sci-fi novel *Cyborg* by Martin Caidan. Yet it hits its stride with the TV series (five in all). Now, Austin lightens up and embraces his abilities, even impressing his mother by secretly lifting her fridge with one hand without tearing the lino. Yes, there are plus sides to being Bionic. Then Austin meets his old flame Jamie Sommers who helpfully (for us) has her body

destroyed in a failed parachute incident. They rebuild her too, as *The Bionic Woman*. Cue another 18-disc set.

With 158 episodes across the two sets, it's hard to pin the gems down. My Six Million tips include 'Death Probe' from Season 4, where Steve has to face an indestructible Russian space vehicle. It's supposed to be on Venus, but it tries to destroy a lovely American town instead. Typical. Then there's 'The Seven Million Dollar Man' from Season 2, where a second cyborg goes power mad, probably due to having all four limbs made bionic, not just three. At least Steve Austin had his one floppy, human arm to keep him grounded.

Bigfoot features in multiple episodes (in both sets), and they're all a hoot. Educational, too. Forget what this magazine tells you about Sasquatch. It's no animal cryptid, just an eight-foot cyborg built and controlled by an alien, Stefanie Powers, to protect her groovy underground space colony. As silly as it sounds, this was a ground-breaking franchise.

Not only was it among the first shows to promote merchandise and kick-ass women, but its unique-for-the-time crossover episodes heralded the shared universe of our current superhero worlds.

These shows were genuine family fare, too, with kooky action for the kids and soap-style drama (and tragedy) for the folks. Call me soppy, but I was hooked on the soft-focus relationship with Steve and Jamie. The latter TV movies (on both sets...and brilliantly cornball) go all in on the love story – while throwing in two Bionic Kids...played by a very young Sandra Bullock and Lee Major's real-life son called...wait for it...Lee Majors II.

Both sets are rich with commentaries and extras, plus the picture quality blew me away. To think that people watched this on a murky analogue TV set makes this Blu-ray edition a constant revelation, popping with excellent colour, stunning detail and terrific audio. Gentleman, we can remaster him.

In Israel, TV bosses worried that the 'Six Million' title would stoke memories of the holocaust (it sounded too close to the most commonly quoted number of Jewish victims). They switched it to 'The Man Worth Millions.' They wanted that show, no matter what... as did millions of others around the planet. Slo-mo running, robot Bigfoot and 'dit-dit-dit' works in all languages.

Yes, the price tag is high but reasonable. With a running time of almost six days straight, you get loads of content with these sets. To put the figure into perspective, there's been talk of Mark Wahlberg rebooting the show. Adjusted for inflation, the plan is to call it *The Six Billion Dollar Man*. At least it doesn't cost that much.

Peter Laws





TELEVISION

FT's very own couch potato, STU NEVILLE, casts an eye over the small screen's current fortaen offerings



Conspiracies Decoded (Quest) has a clear brief: "expert analysis combined with 21st century forensic science uncovers groundbreaking new evidence to reveal the truth behind the world's darkest conspiracies." Its major drawback appears to be that it doesn't know what a conspiracy is.

Yellowstone Park sits on top of one of the world's largest active volcanoes. For millions of years it has periodically blown a gasket and made the day of everything in a huge radius considerably worse. Apparently it erupts roughly every 650,000 years and the last eruption was 650,000 years ago, so it's due another one (the "roughly" qualifier is very important here).

Scientists set up a series of probes and sensors to get an idea of the size of the magma chamber, and indeed there's a whole lot of hot rock there, a 400 mile deep well of it. As magma heats up, we're told, it rises up "like a giant lava lamp" – well, yes – meanwhile the number of earthquakes is increasing year on year, coupled with footage of stampeding bison which could imply an imminent eruption. Does the wildlife know something we don't? Or, as wolves and bears inhabit

Footage of stampeding bison could imply an imminent eruption

the park and both hunt bison (apart from those that wear hats and steal picnic baskets), could the bison be running from them? Another scientist tells us we're not really likely to see a super extinction volcano anytime soon and you're actually more likely to win the lottery. Well, there we go, then. All very interesting, but not a conspiracy unless the tacit implication is that the government knows more.

Briskly on to Louisiana in 2009. A woman's body is found so badly injured that it is unrecognisable. However they do manage to recover some DNA from her, and through the use of DNA phenotyping they build up a profile of the killer including a physical description: they generate a digital image, leading to an anonymous tip-off and a subsequent conviction – again, however, not a conspiracy.

Next up, though, one that does qualify in theory

at least: COVID. Was it manmade or not? We're told most countries have labs devoted to potentially lethal bio-agents, the UK's Porton Down being cited as an example. The spotlight is thrown on the Wuhan Institute – has it a secret purpose we're asked portentously along with footage of multiple CCTV cameras, fences, guards etc around its perimeter. A chat about bats, pangolins and Chinese intransigence culminates in a televisual shrug. Finally, a mystery nuclear test in the southern Indian Ocean turns out to be probably Israeli thanks to examination of sheep thyroids in Melbourne.

It's well made and interesting but most of the content is more *Tomorrow's World* than *X-Files*: the programme just looks at the facts and works out whether or not there is anything to cover up. But then, of course, that could be viewed as a conspiracy.

Medusa

Dir Anita Rocha da Silveira, Brazil 2023
Available on streaming services

A mob of young religious women vigilantes stalk the nighttime streets of São Paulo, torturing perceived sinners and then sharing their forced repentances on social media, while by day they sing on stage at their evangelical church. Meanwhile, one of the gang, Mariana, becomes obsessed with finding the whereabouts of an actress who was punished for her loose morals and left with terrible facial scars. Herself scarred by a 'sinner' acting in self-defence, Mariana's quest takes on a hallucinatory and nightmarish dimension as she disconnects from the world around her.

While actually the second feature film from Anita Rocha da Silveira, *Medusa* feels a lot like a first effort – it has an experimental, student-filmy

kineticism which is in equal parts amusing and off-putting. With its central posse of primly hypocritical evangelists, *Medusa* at times looks and sounds like a Brazilian remake of *The Righteous Gemstones*, and it is in these moments where Rocha da Silveira is at her most assured, gleefully popping the pious excesses and staging some jaw-clenchingly awful but toe-tappingly delightful Christian music numbers.

Where the film fails is in inviting any kind of audience investment. The predatory gang of mean girls is a neat image, but making the lead so utterly loathsome makes it hard for us to care about what happens to her. Similarly, there is not enough narrative focus, with the mystery plot handled so loosely that it is impossible to stay interested.

Martin Parsons



A Life on the Farm

Dir Oliver Harding, UK 2021
In UK cinemas from 8 Sept 2023

Well, here's an odd one: a 74-minute documentary built around forgotten VHS home movies made in the 1990s by Charles Carson, an eccentric farmer from Huish Champflower, Somerset. The publicity describes it as "*Monty Python meets The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*", and there's some truth to that: initial amusement turns to disbelief when Charles graduates from filming (and burying) one of the dead farm cats to photographing his dead mother, first by the fireside where she has just passed away and then in various spots around the farm where he trundles her in her wheelchair. So far, so *Psycho*, but then a narrative emerges, through interviews with locals who knew Charles and the thoughts of poet/

undertaker Thomas Lynch among others, and the film pivots to being a celebration of an outsider artist's drive to create; it may well strike some viewers, though, as a slightly exploitative portrait of a lonely, troubled man slowly succumbing to loneliness and dementia. We learn Charles's backstory – he grew up on farms and became a teacher at an agricultural college before returning to Coombe End Farm to look after his ailing, aged parents, sacrificing his marriage in the process. Perhaps Charles was a genuine naïve artist whose films – viral videos before their time – of cardboard skeletons, deceased cats and birthing cows stoically accept that all flesh is grass and the seasons keep turning. There you are, as Charles liked to say: that's life on the farm. In fact, that's life.

David Sutton




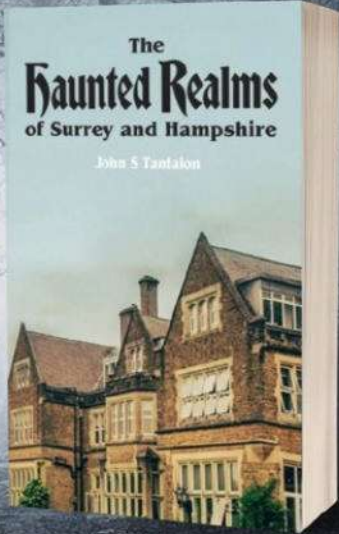



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Warming up

Bravo to David Hambling for his precise response to Barry Baldwin on climate change causes [FT434:14]. Are there any places online where we can find the sources he mentions, especially the satellite tracking of how much energy reaches us from the Sun each year?

It's always good to have solid sources to provide to those contesting the current understanding. I often think that apart from any emotional reassurance people arguing against human caused climate change provide themselves, what they're really looking for is to feel engagement with the subject. Actual data rather than second- or third-hand reports might help them feel as if they're being given the chance to understand, rather than just accept on authority.

Dean Teasdale

By email

David Hambling writes:

I have provided TinyURL links for three of the most relevant references below.

NASA's page on "Is the Sun causing global warming?" <https://tinyurl.com/4nnbk33w>

Paper with details on 'fingerprinting' and determining that human-produced greenhouse gases and particulate atmospheric pollution have influenced global changes <https://tinyurl.com/yj5m8n8>
Space.com piece on how solar changes affect Earth's climate but are not responsible for this round of climate change <https://tinyurl.com/4w4m946p>

Kenneth Anger

Excellent Kenneth Anger obituary [FT434:26-27]. I think it worth noting that Anger is the only person who maintains that Bobby Beausoleil stole the *Lucifer Rising* footage (shot in 1967, not 1966 as the obituary states) and buried it in the desert. Beausoleil himself has always denied it. But Anger always seemed prone to exaggeration and embellishment where Beausoleil was concerned. For example, the claim that Anger cursed Beausoleil following their falling out; the way Anger told it

SIMULAGRA CORNER



Stephen Kerr photographed this face in a wood near Church Stretton, Shropshire

We are always glad to receive pictures of spontaneous forms and figures, or any curious images. Send them (with your postal address) to Fortean Times, PO Box 1200, Whitstable CT1 9RH or to sieveking@forteanimes.com

in later interviews, the result was that when Beausoleil left San Francisco in the autumn of 1967 his car broke down outside Spahn Ranch, where the Manson women lured him in and his fate was sealed. Beausoleil's vehicle did indeed break down, but it was before he reached Los Angeles. He didn't meet Manson until a few months afterwards, and Manson and his group weren't even living at Spahn Ranch until May 1968. If Anger is plain wrong about that oft-repeated story, maybe there's something in Beausoleil's claim of innocence regarding the *Lucifer Rising* footage after all.

Darren Francis

By email

Mother Mary

The implication in 'Classical Corner' [FT434:11], that "Let It Be" by The Beatles is a reference to the Virgin Mary, is incorrect. The song refers to a dream

visitation by Paul McCartney's long-dead mother during the stressful last years of the fab four. Mrs Mary McCartney gave birth to Paul – and brother Michael out of The Scaffold – with no help from mythological beings.

Carlton B Morgan

By email

Titan again

Interesting that the recent *Titanic* submarine tragedy (18 June 2023) involved a vessel named *Titan*, as that was the name of the ship involved in a fictional maritime disaster in an 1898 publication that foresaw the actual sinking by 14 years.

● Was there really a polar bear on the loose in 1990s Northern Ireland, as featured in an episode of E4 sitcom *Derry Girls*, or was it rather like the alien big cats of UK infamy?

Phil Brand

London

Hole explained

The "bus stop puzzle" [FT434:65] was caused by a vandal burning a hole with a cigarette in the plastic partition. I recognised the hole immediately. It used to be often seen in the days when bus shelters were common and vapes were non-existent. Similar vandalism happened in other places, but it was common at bus stops presumably because of smokers getting bored waiting for a bus.

Andrew Hardwick

Ipswich, Suffolk

Editor's note: Thanks to Bob Johnson for making the same point.

Gemma Crowe blames a cigarette lighter.

Skin colour myth

I'd like to share an interesting legend with you. I heard it at least 50 years ago, when I was at school in Africa. I don't recall which country I was in at the time – it would have been Kenya or Zambia – but I believe a fellow pupil told it to me. It recounts how humans got their different skin colours.

Originally, everyone was completely black. Then one day, a group of people came across a lake of white liquid. They completely covered themselves in the fluid, and became the white people. Sometime later, another group encountered the lake, which was now greatly reduced in volume, and they could only apply a very thin layer of fluid to their bodies. They became the brown people. Finally, another group found the site, which by now was little more than a puddle, and all they could do was dab their hands and feet in it. These were the black people.

Dave Miles

By email

Moulton Crows

Pedant alert: regarding the 'Moulton Crows' [FT433:51], should somebody point out to the participants that crows have black beaks, not bright yellow? Blackbirds, on the other hand *do* have bright yellow/orange beaks.

Thomas Jones

Landford, Wiltshire



Wodewose in Wick

I'm a Highland journalist/filmmaker and read with interest Clive Watson's letter [FT428:63] on the subject of wodewose (or woodwose), having previously written in our local paper, the *John O'Groat Journal*, about a sculpted one in the town of Wick in Caithness.

My article was written a few years ago but I was similarly intrigued, as Mr Watson was, as to how an archetypal image of a caveman could have been depicted by artists/craftsmen in the mediæval and immediate post-mediæval eras. The focus of my article was a sculptural frieze within an unusual funerary edifice called the Dunbar Tomb situated in the graveyard of St Fergus Church in Wick. The tomb appears to have been constructed in the early 18th century, but the sculptural elements date from an earlier church, mostly demolished, and were fixed to the interior walls of the building. This frieze dating from the 16th century contains various *momento mori* figures and the Dunbar family coat of arms.



The figure on the right-hand side, tucked in a corner, intrigued me and I believe it is a depiction of a wodewose or wild man which often appeared as a heraldic device. Like Mr Watson, I was similarly confused as to how an archetypal depiction of a caveman, complete with loin cloth and large club, could have been created by a 16th century craftsman.

On further study, I found that numerous artists had depicted similar creatures from the mediæval period onwards, and they were often used as an allegory for contemporary civilisation versus the barbarous life of the heathen wildmen. Wodewoses may be a pagan throwback, or perhaps based on mediæval encounters with real forest dwellers who lived off-grid. They appear to be fearsome on one level but benign on another, and even helped knights battle dragons.

I guess the Caithness countryside had more trees in it back in the 1500s as a feral man would have a hard job finding a good-sized forest to live within nowadays.

David Graham Scott,
Watten, Highland, Scotland



Old Hobicus Lane

Regarding the feature on postcards from fairyland [FT433:32-39]: near to where I live in Oldbury, West Midlands, is a short road called Old Hobicus Lane. Could there be any connection with folklore? The area is densely built up and the origins of the name probably lost in time. As we know, Hob is a name for the Devil.

Tony Phipps
Oldbury, West Midlands

Apt

Is it true that the statue of Vladimir Putin in the Worcestershire village of Bell End [FT433:26] goes by the alternative name of the Penis de Milo?

Tony Sandy
By email

Editor's note: Quite possibly

Nessie at ninety

Regarding the Hugh Gray Nessie photo, I first came across the "dog with a stick in its mouth" interpretation of the picture in 1990s *Mind Monsters*, a fascinating book from veteran FT contributor Jenny Randles. The canine theory isn't presented as a debunking of the Gray photo, however: Randles uses it as an example of the fallibility of human perception. If you look at the picture expecting to see Nessie, then Nessie is what you see; but if you're expecting to see a swimming dog playing fetch, you'll see that happy pooch instead. The significance of the photo is not in what it actually shows, but in what we each believe that it shows – a point that's important to the book's speculations.

As a long-term Nessie enthusiast, I've always been fascinated by the Gray photograph, largely because it doesn't really show anything at all, though some Ness-friendly writers skirt over this uncomfortable fact (I owned at least one book that reproduced it upside down!). If it hadn't been the first Loch Ness Monster photo, and hadn't appeared at the height of the original media furor, would such a blurred-out, nebulous picture of nothing in particular have gained any traction at all? I suspect it would probably have been quickly forgotten or relegated to curio status if the "Surgeon's Pho-

tograph" hadn't popped up only a few months later to give Nessie a solid form. Given what that photo eventually turned out to be, does this mean the entire Loch Ness mystery was built on a wet Labrador and a plastic submarine from Woolworths? In some ways this would be just as wonderful as if Nessie turned out to be real.

Chris Tighe
Oxford

Feline assassin

Before I was born, during the very early 1970s, my parents lived in Yorkshire, on the far edge of Pickering, and owned a large marmalade tomcat called Tommy.

Behind their house was a big grassy field, containing an age-old rabbit warren; the denizens of which apparently lazed above-ground with total impunity. The cat, on my family moving into the house, decided it had to stop. Beginning with the smallest, he systematically killed every member of the community, leaving each corpse under the car – decapitated – so that when it was moved, a veritable slaughterhouse would be revealed, numbers usually reaching double figures. However, when not butchering bunnies, he also killed rats at the farm across the road, and these he would lay in a neat row along their kitchen doorstep, still with their heads. Here he displayed two very different depositing techniques, for two different species, at two different places. I think this demonstrates something approaching ritual.

Arthur Burton
Maidstone, Kent

Rosenheim poltergeist

In his review of the TV documentary series *Arthur C. Clarke's World of Strange Powers* [FT432:35], Ryan Shirlow very swiftly dismisses the 1967 German Rosenheim poltergeist case as fraudulent. This dismissal is justified by a reference to a 10 April 1970 *Die Zeit* article from Alexander Adrion entitled "Geister oder Nylon?" In this article, Adrion cites claims of the discovery of nylon lines attached to light fittings and a wall plate,

and also a rubber stick that was supposed to be used to cause other poltergeist 'effects'.

Adrion's source is a book by Allan/Schiff/Kramer entitled: *False Ghosts – Real Swindlers*. This book had come to the attention of *Die Zeit* because of a court case brought by the original investigator of the case, Professor Hans Bender, to the Traunstein District Court. Adrion also mentions in the article that the second chamber of the court was then considering whether the charges of fraud could be proved.

Adrion's article predates the outcome of the case. The court ruling was reported in *Die Welt* on 13 April 1970. The court ruled that the book by Neumann alleging fraud was too superficial and had not proved its case. An article and translation also appeared in *Journal of Paraphysics* 4:3 1970, p.101 "Rosenheim Legal Dispute: Court decides in favour of paranormality," translated by Manfred Cassirer.

I think that there are other reasons for questioning the fraud allegations. Shirlow does not mention that the alleged focal point of the case, an office worker named Annemarie Schneider, was at one point put under police investigation and was being watched by an Officer Wendl. Wendl himself reportedly witnessed the movement of a 180kg (400lb) cabinet by about a foot. (Source: C Godman & L St. Clair (1984): 'A spirit of Anger' in P Brookesmith (Ed) *Ghosts*. Black Cat, pp.160-163.) Even allowing for the vagaries of eyewitness testimony, I find it hard to believe that this officer would not notice anything suspicious in the course of his investigations, especially because he was on the lookout for fraud. This doesn't of course prove that a poltergeist or psychokinesis was responsible for the occurrences at the office, but it does in my view cast significant doubt on the fraud allegations.

Matt Colborn
Haconby, Lincolnshire

Acting on belief

In criticising my letter to FT, Dean Teasdale grants the possibility that I have imagination, humour and a sense of proportion [FT434:65]. I thank him for

his generosity of spirit and would like to return the compliment. I happily concede that most mild beliefs in the supernatural do not in themselves lead to bad outcomes. What killjoy would find fault in a young child's belief in Santa Claus? And yet, when that same belief in a magical man who brings presents to good children every Christmas morning is expressed by an otherwise mentally competent adult, does it not give most of us at least a slight pause?

Regarding the wearing of a charm to deflect bullets, Dean asks, "where's the harm?" The answer is "nowhere" if you don't believe it works. If you don't actually believe in Santa Claus, fairies or magic charms then you are merely a neutral observer. You have no dog in this fight. Enjoy reading *Fortean Times* and be on your way.

But what if you really do believe? *What if you actually behave as if what you believe is true?* I suggest that you ask Kara Neumann's parents. In March 2008 11-year-old Kara died on the floor of her family home in Wisconsin. She had recently become too weak to walk, speak, eat or drink because she was suffering from diabetes. Her condition was perfectly treatable but instead of calling a doctor or taking Kara to hospital, her parents prayed for her, because they believed – they truly believed – that prayer was the magic charm that could protect their daughter. Perhaps they felt that prayer was a tool to psych themselves up to face something they *really* felt they had to do. After all, where's the harm in that?

Martin Stubbs
London

Wonder preserved

In my ongoing trawl through old FT issues, I found Matt Colborn's plea for wonder [FT415:58-59] very disappointing. He sounds like a 10-year-

old wanting to see magic tricks at an age when he's really starting to understand they are tricks. I applaud FT for the gradual dismantling of the body of the heretofore 'unknown' and slotting things carefully into rationally comprehensible phenomena. This does not leave nothing unknown, as Mr Colborn intimates, only new frontiers. It demands of us keener observation.

I have some of the Middle-Aged Mulder Syndrome, but have not lost my sense of wonder at all: I have merely tired of bad observations and silly credulity. The ordinary world, if one cares to look, is suffused and saturated with occasions for wonder. I believe Magic is largely a metaphorical or poetical language to shake people from their mundane slumber, an exaggeration for the purpose of making us look again. Because the most ordinary things are magically beautiful when given attention. I don't need tricks or fancies when there is bottomless mystery in beauty itself, ever-present more or less everywhere.

Wonders are interesting so long as they are actually wonderful. And hoaxes are amusing. Simulacra remain fun. The interface of the known and the mysterious, or at least the surprising, is still with us: it's only that we've put to bed some of the distractions.

I suggest Mr Colborn spends an hour listening to a babbling brook and really looking closely at a daisy.

Adrienne O'Toole
By email



"Well, this is progress. We used to have to suck our energy from solitary cars on quiet country lanes in the middle of the night"

It Happened to Me...

Mystery tomato

In late 2001 we moved from busy London into an old (circa 1840-1860s) timbered cottage in a semi-rural location. It had wooden beams throughout and dark wood doors. A door closed off the bottom of the walled stairwell, which made the stairs even darker.

I was expecting our first child, and had to get up two or three times a night to go to the tiny loo, which was tucked into the corner of the landing at the top of the steep wooden stairs. As I passed by, I always felt a strong compulsion to look down into the dark stairwell (we closed the bottom 'stair door' at night). But I would resist the urge to look with all my might. I felt that *something* was staring up at me. It wanted me to look down and see it. I got the feeling it was an old woman with wispy grey hair. She was standing on the bottom step, in the shadows – but I refused to look, and would waddle back to bed as quickly as I could.

The feeling never left me over the next two years: that the woman was there at night, looking up at me, urging me to look down and see her on the bottom stair. I eventually told my husband I didn't like the stairwell door, so he removed it. He admitted he also didn't like the dark stairway, and we laughed nervously as he said he'd often thought there was a figure or presence at the bottom of the stairs.

We put the cottage up for sale in 2004 as it was too small for our growing family. I was packing things up and moving boxes around and had to go up the stairs for something. As I stepped onto the first stair, I saw there was a beautiful little tomato sitting right in the middle of it. I picked it up and asked my husband why he'd put a tomato on the stair. He denied it. We don't grow tomatoes. I don't eat tomatoes. No shops nearby. No visitors had been in the house. Our daughter was two years old, and only just toddling. She wouldn't have been able to find a fresh tomato anywhere. Our son was a newborn baby.

Confused, I checked the



"I got the feeling it was an old woman standing on the bottom step"

tomato for bruises or teeth marks (we had a cat – could, or would, a cat carry in a small tomato from a neighbouring garden and put it on the bottom stair?) but the tomato's surface was unmarked, fresh and smooth. We just don't know how a tomato could've got there. We've never been able to think of a satisfying explanation. The stairwell was walled, and had no windows, so it can't have been dropped or thrown in. To us, the tomato just appeared.

We found out the cottage was built by a local master builder for his spinster daughter who lived there alone. We joked she'd left a tomato for us when she knew we were leaving. Kind of a desperate love token to the family who shared her home but always ignored her!

Jacqueline Steel
Godalming, Surrey

A vision of mother

Last autumn I was suddenly taken ill with urosepsis which came on extremely quickly. I was in hospital for almost a week, but I can remember very little of the first couple of days, part of which I spent in the Active Assessment Unit of the hospital's A&E department. I was in considerable pain and was given something. I think

this may have been a liquid form of paracetamol; I am certain that it wasn't morphine.

At some point, whether I was dreaming or hallucinating, I don't know, I very clearly saw my mother, who had died some 10 years previously. She was sitting across from me in the cubicle with quite a stern expression on her face, but she was not looking at me at all. I distinctly remember thinking something along the lines of "Thank goodness, she's not looking at me, I'm going to live, that's OK then".

Her presence wasn't for long and was entirely neutral in character – she was just, well, she was just there for a short period of time. What I took specifically from that experience is that I was considerably more unwell than I really care to think about.

Huw Pritchard
London

Coins appearing

We lost our beloved dog Rascal a couple of years ago. He was extremely close to my wife, myself, and my mother. After he died, my mother, who lives in assisted accommodation, began seeing coins outside her window in an enclosed courtyard where nobody goes. She connected it immediately to our little dog's death. Since then, when I visit my mother or take her to the doctor, we almost always find coins.

Their placement is unique in that they are always exactly in the middle of where we are sitting or walking – in places we are sure

to find them, such as on the pavement when we open our car doors, or where we sit in waiting rooms etc. Soon after Rascal died, one of them was a "buffalo head" nickel from the late 1800s by my car door in a very busy place.

While there is no science behind it, finding these coins make us happy that he is still with us watching us. In a time when the use of coins is becoming less and less popular, the fact that we find these coins regularly seems beyond coincidence.

Randy Murawski
Springfield, Missouri

The grey boys

My then partner and I were staying for a while at my parents' flat in Haddenham, Buckinghamshire. One night he caught the last train from Marylebone, London, but soon realised that it didn't stop at Haddenham. He decided to get off at Princes Risborough and walk, rather than get a taxi, a decision he soon regretted, as the walk turned out longer than he anticipated.

He was navigating by road signs. The last stretch of road was quite a minor country road, bordered by hedges, with fields on either side. The Moon was quite bright, so visibility wasn't too bad. As he approached a bend in the road, he first became aware of the sound of running water, and then a few moments later, an inexplicable feeling of dread came over him. He thought to himself that he really needed to get past this part of the road as soon as possible.

Then he came to a gate that provided a break in the hedges. In the field beyond were what he called 'grey boys'. They were small, the size of young children, and in the moonlight they looked all grey. There were quite a few of them, and they were running about blindly in a circle in the middle of the field, with their hands on their heads, leaning forward slightly, as if they were in a blind panic or distress.

He got a feeling it was really important that he did not get their attention (possibly just a normal fear reaction), and he walked on

as quickly and quietly as possible. Soon the feeling of dread lifted and he could no longer hear running water.

Of course he told me about this as soon as he got in, and I remember getting up and closing the window as he talked, as I found it so creepy I was worried that something might have followed him back.

My partner had no particular interest in fortune-telling, so had no expectations of seeing anything, and no framework to explain this. He was just really fascinated by this weird experience and told anyone he could in the village, as he was interested to know if anyone had had any similar experiences or heard any stories.

He did find one person who had had come across the 'grey boys'. J was a well-known character in the village, often seen in the local pubs or on his bike around the village and surrounding countryside. When my partner told him about them, J looked really disgruntled and said, oh yes, he had seen them. He said he had been out on his bike and they had "tumbled him into a ditch".

I had always presumed that the feeling of dread, the sound of water, and the grey boys were aspects of the same phenomenon; however, writing this after many years, I wonder if the 'grey boys' were just reacting to whatever caused the feeling of dread. I would be really interested to know if anyone has come across anything similar.

Louise van der Hoeven
Langley Park, Co Durham

Sky lights

In about 1994, my husband and I and our four-year-old son were driving from Mapperley in Nottingham to Farnsfield. While waiting in traffic to join the A614, I saw above and to my right (I was in the back seat) a large red glowing stationary object. At first I thought it was a helicopter, but it had lights of different colours rotating beneath it. As I was telling my husband about it, it moved over the top of the car to my left. We joined the A614 and I could still see it clearly moving slowly



"A message came through: you must sleep in the shelter tonight"

across fields to my left. Then I saw several small white lights that appeared to come from the glowing red object and fly ahead of it. I followed the procession until it was out of sight. My husband could not see it from the driver's side, but still remembers everything I described. I never told anyone else, assuming no one would believe me.

Mrs D Newton
By email

Saved from a bomb

In 1941, my family and I were living in a house in Holloway, north London, with bombs dropping everywhere. My mother was gifted with automatic writing, where her hand seemed to be controlled from the spirit world, and received many messages.

One night, a message came through: "You must sleep in the shelter tonight!" The brick-built shelters were erected in the road and we didn't like the smelly atmosphere, but nonetheless took notice of this message. My parents, myself (aged about three) and my sister Judy (aged about 18 months) were asleep in bunk beds when there was an enormous bang and rush of air. Next morning, my father, who

was an ARP warden, found that our house was almost demolished. The premonition had saved our lives.

Peter Cawthorne
Widegates, Cornwall

Two 2003 big cats

In 2003 my co-worker Robert Mantz and I were travelling north on the East Range on Fort Huachuca, (Sierra Vista), in Cochise County, Arizona. Robert drove as I sat in the passenger seat of our radio emitter van (Echo 1). Sunrise was at 6.15 and the Sun had just cleared the peaks of the Chiricahua Mountains about 50 miles (80km) due east. What we took to be a melanistic mountain lion (*Felis concolor*) crossed the dirt road, about 125ft (38m) ahead passing from right to left, emerging from medium density high desert grasses and scattered mesquite trees. Robert and I estimate length, including tail, at 5ft (1.5m) and weight between 100 and 125lb (45-57kg). The entire body was black with no noticeable lighter or darker areas. The animal was walking fast, not running, and in view for about five seconds. As it crossed the road from right to left, it did not turn its head. We were in a noisy radio truck doing a classified test on a dirt road. Our direction of travel was generally north. Loren Coleman points out that "*Felis concolor* has not been verified to exist in a melanistic phase, and to label a sighted cryptid that appears to look like, or is locally called, a 'black panther' as a melanistic mountain lion is incorrect."

My co-worker and I still think we saw a black mountain lion, not a black jaguar. However, in communications with wildlife specialists with the US Forest Service, Arizona Game and Fish, and the Malpai Borderlands Group and a recent newspaper article on jaguars in Arizona and New Mexico reveals more jaguars photographed and reported in recent years, several "almost black" mountain lions caught.

Terry W Colvin
Thailand

On Saturday 10 May 2003, my wife and I were driving south from Lowestoft in Suffolk on the A12 when we saw what appeared to be a female lion (or possibly a puma) beside the carriageway. The animal was lying about 10-15ft (3-4.6m) from the carriageway, facing the road, and appeared to be asleep. The location was about halfway between Blythburgh and Darsham, on the east side of the road. I believe there is a turning to a quarry nearby on the west side of the carriageway, before you reach the Little Chef. The sighting was at 6.20am, in very clear conditions; in fact there was not a cloud in the sky. There was very little traffic around at that time and so, as we were travelling at the speed limit, we had travelled a good distance before it registered what we had seen.

I know that there are other large animals in that area, such as deer, but the animal's face was clearly visible and was not that of a deer. A lion or puma's face is pretty recognisable, and not really like any other native animal of that size. After we had passed it, we both just sat there quietly for a few seconds before saying to each other "Was that... a lion?" We wondered if we should turn back and have another look, but we were already late picking up a friend in Ipswich on our way to an event in Surrey, starting at 9am, so by the time we had convinced ourselves what we had seen there was no time to turn back and check. However, we are still convinced that that was what we had seen.

David Ellis
By email

LETTERS

Tales of the Beast

In his article on Wyndham Lewis's novel *The Childermass* [FT430:51], Richard George said he was not sure if Lewis ever met Aleister Crowley. Perhaps a meeting would not have been to Lewis's advantage. Here is 'The Great Beast' from a 1919 edition of *The Equinox* (text version available on-line): "Mr Wyndham Lewis was living some few years ago on the charity of a young lady, the admired and honoured friend of many artists. She had taken compassion on him, because he told her that he wrote poetry – an excusable falsehood. Perhaps he even believed it. She asked me if I would help him by publishing poems of his, and I wrote to him. He replied by complaining that the young lady aforesaid had tried to seduce him. I wrote to Mr. Lewis, and told him that he was a stupid cad, and that I would kick him if I saw him."

Michael Wyndham
Ealing, London

I never thought I would find myself defending the morals of the Beast 666, but I have to say that while very grateful for Nina Antonia's generous review of my book *City of the Beast: The London of Aleister Crowley* [FT432:55]. Ms Antonia's account of Crowley as a possible child-abuser goes beyond what we know to be true. With reference to the infant son of Leah Hirsig, "after he had sex with the toddler" is not only deliberately stomach-turning but misleadingly immediate and definite, almost suggesting the aftermath of a specific incident, whereas it would be more accurate to say "at a period in his life when he boasted of paedophilic feelings towards the infant" (in the course of looking back and trying to make himself and Hirsig sound as Satanic as possible). What the book actually says of Crowley's self-damning claims is that unfortunately they don't sound "either allegorical or pure fantasy". Further than that, we can't be sure what might have happened.

Phil Baker
London

I was intrigued to read that Katherine Mansfield considered Aleister Crowley "very dirty"

Nirvana synchronicity

Las Vegas artist James Stanford reports that two sisters, Lynn and Kris, had a strange synchronicity. Firstly, each sister bought the same fine art photograph entitled *Nirvana* from artist Kathleen Nathan's exhibit "Upstate: Revisiting the Roadways of Upstate New York" at the Sahara West Library gallery in Las Vegas, Nevada (9 March – 20 May 2023). They had planned to surprise each other with these gifts. Without consulting each other, when Kris showed up to meet Kathleen at James Stanford's home, she was dressed identically to Lynn with a blue and white striped blouse and Levi's. Here they are pictured holding their identical photographs – living proof of the strangeness of synchronicity!

Jeffrey Vallance Canoga Park, California



[FT429:34]. The problem may not have been poor personal hygiene but the chiasm of his own devising with which he anointed himself, "Ruthvah, the Perfume of Immortality". This, apparently, was one part ambergris, two parts musk and three parts civet. If the potency of his alcoholic cocktails is anything to go by, this would have been eye-wateringly strong, and when you consider what body parts civet and ambergris emanate from... Enough said. Interestingly, Mansfield herself did not smell of incorrupt bodies: Virginia Woolf, on meeting her,

wrote "She stinks like a civet cat that had taken up street-walking". All this reminds me of a quote from Martial: *malo quam bene olere nil olere*, "I'd rather smell of nothing than 'smell nice'" (Book 6, Poem 55).

- I was at school at the time of Public Information Films [FT429:38], and one day our physics teacher saw fit to impart a cautionary tale about electricity. Hilaire Belloc it was not. An unwise child used a pylon as the ultimate climbing frame, and, not unsurprisingly, was fried to

a crispy noodle. In his descent, cables sliced off his head. The punch line, in a lugubrious South Walian accent, was unforgettable: "Boy who found him couldn't talk for two weeks".

- By the way, SD Tucker's "Constipated" character head [FT429:50] reminds me, via another Martial epigram, that a similar expression was attributed to the emperor Vespasian, who ironically died of diarrhoea.
Richard George
St Albans, Hertfordshire

Major Jesse Marcel

I am not convinced by SD Tucker's rebuttal of my letter about Jesse Marcel [FT432:63], although I appreciate his taking the trouble to respond. Marcel was very familiar with weather balloons and Tucker's suggestion that Roswell Army Air Field's chief intelligence officer could not have recognised their component parts is just absurd. In fact, Marcel was later promoted to Lieutenant Colonel and went on to work on the Mogul project, among other things. The US Air Force eventually claimed that a downed Mogul balloon was what had actually crashed on the Foster ranch near Roswell – but Marcel gave his testimony to investigators after he had left the military. The photographs, to which Tucker refers, show Marcel with the remains of an actual weather balloon, which General Roger Ramey had substituted for the real debris. It is therefore not surprising that some of it looks like actual foil, because that is what it was.

I am familiar with the allegations that Marcel lied about his war record (they were repeated in Kal Korff's 1997 sceptical book about Roswell: *The Roswell UFO Crash – What they don't want you to know*) but when I looked into them, admittedly a long time ago, they didn't seem to amount to much more than beefing up one's CV, of which many of us are guilty. Had Marcel not have had a creditable military record, then the US Army would not have kept him on the active list after the War.

Geoff Clifton
Solihull, West Midlands

PECULIAR POSTCARDS



JAN BONDESON shares another deltiological discovery from his prodigious collection of postcards. This month's pictorial blast from the past celebrates the successful career of Harold Pyott, "the smallest adult human being in the world"

38. HAROLD PYOTT, THE ENGLISH MIDGET

Harold Pyott was born in Lord Street, Stockport, in late 1887. He had two elder sisters, both of whom died young. He is said to have been small at birth, albeit not abnormally so; the problem was that his growth was extremely slow, leading to severe proportional dwarfism. His diagnosis is likely to have been pituitary dwarfism, caused by underproduction of growth hormone. Harold's parents both died when he was 12 years old, and he was taken in by his cousin Will Beeley, who worked as a postal clerk in Edinburgh. Beeley soon realised the commercial prospects of this extraordinary dwarf boy, and became his manager.

As an adult, Harold stood 23in (58cm) tall and weighed 21lb (0.9kg). Doctors found him perfectly healthy and normal, except that he was the smallest adult human they had ever seen. He was the mascot for Stockport County football team for a while, and at half time he was paraded round the Edgeley Park ground sitting on the palm of a man's hand. In his circus career, Harold travelled as far as South Africa. Many postcards were printed to advertise him. Billed as 'Tiny Tim', 'The Living Doll', 'The English Midget' or 'The English Tom Thumb', he performed before royalty more than once. During WWI he was called up to the Army three times, but each time the shocked recruiters turned him away.

Later in life, Harold settled down in Heywood near Manchester, living in the house of his manager and being waited on by the manager's wife and daughter. The daughter later described him as the perfect gentleman, courteous and particular about his appearance. He always wore



ABOVE: Harold and his miniature carriage. **RIGHT:** Cards showing Harold performing with the Beeleys, aged 38 and on show in France.

a gold ring which he said had been given to him by Queen Mary. Since he was financially independent after his many years in show business, he had a set of matching furniture made by a cabinet maker, including a high chair that enabled him to sit at table. Since he was fearful of being kidnapped and exploited, the manager's wife and daughter had to make sure he was never left alone. Harold was fond of a glass of rum before breakfast, and as a nightcap last thing at night, because he thought it benefited his chest. On occasion, he went back to exhibiting himself for money, and in 1937 appeared in a sideshow in Hemel Hempstead. While there, he caught a virulent bronchial infection and died shortly before his 50th birthday.



Fortean Traveller



137. The Gef Pilgrimage

RICHARD FREEMAN recounts his experiences from two jointly mounted trips to the Isle of Man in search of traces of Gef the Talking Mongoose

In May of 2022 a team of forteans braved the mist-shrouded moorlands of The Isle of Man on the trail of a legend: Gef The Talking Mongoose. The group, made up of members of the Centre for Fortean Zoology and the Lancashire Anomalous Phenomena Investigation Society (LAPIS), consisted of myself, Jackie Tonks, Janet Walkey, Paul Pearson, Ben and Gayle Fiddler, Steve Jones and Dr Dan Holdsworth.

For the uninitiated, Gef was supposedly a sort of phantom mongoose that haunted a house in the south-west of the island in the 1930s. Built in the 19th century, the house was once owned by Pierre Baume, a French merchant. After his death in 1875 the house stood empty until 1916 when it was bought by Jim Irving, a piano salesman from Liverpool. He moved in with his wife Margaret, daughter Voirrey and Mona the dog. In the early 1930s, poltergeist activity broke out in the house, beginning with knocking and scratching noises. In 1931, a weird little animal with yellow fur and a bushy tail allegedly began to manifest. It used words, which became sentences, and the sentences became conversations. The creature claimed that its name was Gef and that he was the ghost of a mongoose who had been born in India in 1852. Until 1939, Gef haunted the house and enjoyed a love-hate relationship with the family. Parapsychologists such as Harry Price and Nandor Fodor investigated (see pp32-35); Price thought it a hoax, while Fodor believed it was a genuine phenomenon.

Our plan was to reach the remote area where Gef's gaf – Cashen's Gap, or Doarlish Cashen in Manx – once stood: we would spend the night there and hold a séance.

Our base of operations was Eary Cushlin, a spooky-looking house on a rugged, windswept



The house retained a reputation for being haunted

bit of the island's south-eastern coast. The farmer who had originally owned Eary Cushlin introduced mongooses to the area in 1912 to control the rabbits. The theory has been put forward that Gef himself was one of these creatures. But the weirdness does not end there. During WWII, the house was

owned by eccentric recluse and radio ham Colby Cubbon, who brought Eary Cushlin to avoid having bombs dropped on him by the Nazis: one of only two bombs to hit the Isle of Man fell just yards from the house, leaving a crater that is still there today. Apparently the pilot was dumping his unused bombs before flying back to Germany. While from the outside the house looked like something from an MR James story, on the inside Eary Cushlin was cosy, unspooky and a delight to stay in.

Our taxi driver was sure the whole story was a hoax and that Voirrey Irving had used ventriloquism to fake the whole affair in order to persuade Jim to leave the house and take the family back to England. Various researchers have raised this idea, but it doesn't really stand up. Firstly, if it was a plot to scare Jim away, it backfired. The growing interest in Gef only encouraged him to stay and garnered him attention from all over the world. People other than the Irvings saw Gef, and Gef claimed to have travelled far afield to gain information that Voirrey could not have known. Lastly, ventriloquism itself is not 'throwing your voice', it is speaking without moving the lips and misdirection of the audience. Many people, including investigators, heard



TOP: Eary Cushlin: thankfully not as spooky as it looks. ABOVE: Members of the team outside the house.

PHOTOS: RICHARD FREEMAN

Gef's weird, high-pitched voice when Voirrey was far away or completely absent.

The path, such as it is, to Doarlish Cashen is a rough and winding one, with hard stones – that slit a hole in my walking boots – giving way later to muddy ruts. When we finally reached the site where Doarlish Cashen once stood, it was somewhat underwhelming. The house itself was demolished in 1971 (retaining a reputation for being haunted until the end). I thought that perhaps some foundations might have remained, but the only sign that a building had once been there was a low row of grass-covered rubble and part of an old drain pipe. In what was once the garden there is a natural spring surrounded by rocks, that was used by the Irvings as a well. There is a row of gooseberry bushes planted by Margaret, still thriving after 90 years. Janet and Jackie took cuttings from them in the hope of growing bushes and one day eating Gef's gooseberries! Paul had commissioned a life-sized plush toy of Gef to be made from Voirrey's descriptions, which he posed and photographed in various spots.

What we hadn't realised was that the location was now part of a working farm and the land was in constant use. A barbed wire fence cut off the grass-covered rubble and the area was full of cows with calves. The animals panicked at our approach, mooing loudly in distress and running away. Not wanting to stress the animals or trouble the farmer, we abandoned any idea of an overnight stay or séance.

Christopher Josiffe, in his excellent book *Gef! The Strange Tale of an Extra-Special Talking Mongoose* (Strange Attractor Press, 2017), notes that Gef's intellect seemed to be linked to that of the Irvings. He spoke



Hindi, but poorly, and also had a smattering of Yiddish. Jim had served in India, and had also done business with the Jewish community in Liverpool. Nandor Fodor eventually concluded that Gef was a split-off part of Jim's personality – and yet he seems to be more of a gestalt of the whole family. Could Gef have been a thought form or tulpa? If

so, could he be reactivated? I've had experience with thought form creation experiments before, so I led a meditation with some of the team back at Eary Cushlin. We visualised Gef as described by those who saw him and imagined his essence as well as his physical form, a creature of mischief and misrule. We decided to keep meditating on

ABOVE: The CFZ/LAPIS team at the site where the Irving farmhouse once stood. **LEFT:** Taking some cuttings from Gef's gooseberry bush. **BELOW:** The landscape around Doarlish Cashen.

Gef and to return the following year.

Did Gef ever really leave us? Fortean researcher and long-time FT contributor Jenny Randles was driving near Glen Rushen in 2002 when:

"Suddenly, out of the blue, I saw a creature on the road ahead. It was brownish yellow and rather like a weasel. It looked for all the world like pictures I have seen of a mongoose. If it was not, then it was a close relative. Believe it or not, this animal stood in an otherwise empty road right in front of our car – thankfully we were moving quite slowly uphill at the time. I let out a stifled cry, but the animal took off at speed and vanished into the undergrowth."



In July of 2023 the LAPIS/CFZ team returned to the Isle of Man; this time sans Steve Jones and Dr Dan Holsworth, but with the addition of fortune blogger and researcher Ben Emlyn-Jones. Once again Eary Cushlin, the remotest house on the island, was our base.

Knowing that real, flesh-and-blood mongooses had been released around the house in 1907 by David Malcolm Irving (no relation to Gef's Irving family), we set up several camera traps in the woods and fields and near to the house itself, all baited with pungent flesh.

The fauna of the Isle of Man differs from that of the mainland: there are no deer, foxes, badgers, or snakes. It does, however, have a thriving population of red-necked wallabies. Having escaped from Curragh's Wildlife Park in the 1960s, they are doing very well for themselves with no competition or predators. They are best seen in the early morning, so Janet, Paul and I rose at an ungodly hour and drove to a wooded area close to the wildlife park that is the best area to spot them. We soon came across a large male happily browsing in a field and saw many more hopping about in the woods. If wallabies from Down Under can live on the Isle of Man, why not an extra, extra clever little mongoose?

We were invited to take a look at a supposedly haunted theatre in Peel by The Manx Paranormal, a group of local fortune investigators. Di Howe and Darren Hardacre showed us around the Centenary Theatre where they have undertaken a number of investigations. Di said she had recorded examples of Electronic Voice Phenomena



We soon came across a large male browsing in a field

(EVP) in the green room.

The room was plastered with posters of former productions, including one called "Hitler Ate My Canary". Now that's a play I would have loved to have seen!

We were shown film of a six-foot plus, dark figure walking around in a locked part of the theatre where nobody was supposed to be and of a strange light with a comet-like tail flitting around the seats, though Paul thought this may have been just reflected camera lights.

Di admitted she was sceptical about Gef, thinking the whole affair had been a hoax.

Darren told me of a strange encounter he had as an 11-year-old boy some 39 years ago in New Mills, north Derbyshire. It was just getting dark and he was out on the moors when he saw a tall figure approaching. It was broad shouldered and bigger than a man. It turned its head

to look at him and he saw that its face looked like an Alsatian dog with a pointed snout and erect ears. The creature was walking on two legs, but they looked like those of a dog. After having glanced at him, the thing continued on its way; Darren fled home in terror.

The next day, he returned with friends and found long, dog-like tracks. Darren said that livestock had been vanishing and people were blaming it on a 'panther'. He had even seen police marksmen setting out to hunt the beast, but he knew that what he had seen was no big cat.

We returned to Cashen's Gap, where the Irving house once stood. The cuttings of Margaret Irving's gooseberry bushes that Janet had taken last year had died. This time she brought potting powder and special pots for cutting. She also collected seeds from the gooseberries to try and cultivate them.

Gayle Fiddler tried magnet fishing in the well, dipping a length of string down with a magnet attached into the water, but all she got was a rusty nail. I found a half brick that we think was part of the fireplace and I brought it home as a souvenir. It's next to my computer as I type.

We visited the Waterfall Hotel in Glen Maye where ghost hunter Harry Price stayed when he was investigating Gef in 1935. Built in the 1860s, it has been derelict for several years. According to the Protected Building Register, it does "not demonstrate the special architectural interest required to have a preservation order", so it looks as though it will be torn down and replaced with modern flats.

Back at Eary Cushlin one night, we decided to hold a séance at the house to try and make contact with Gef. Six of us crowded around a Ouija board as Paul filmed. At first, nothing happened and the planchette would not budge as we asked to speak with the famous mongoose. We changed the planchette for a shot glass, but still there was no movement. We thought that too many fingers on the glass might have been holding it down, so we tried with only three: Ben, Jackie and myself. Then things started to happen.

When asked if Gef was there, the glass moved to 'yes' on the board. It began to point to various letters, but these only spelled out gibberish: ERNDFOGKVCAOLYTFAHY. It made no sense in any language, so we called it a night. Jackie did, however, say that during the séance she'd had an overwhelming urge to spit at people and scream "nincompoo!" Make of that what you will.

The next day, we took a boat trip around the south-west coast of the island, where we hoped to see whales and basking sharks that are known to frequent the seas around the Isle of Man. They were not forthcoming, but we saw seals and seabirds and



TOP: No sign of a mongoose, but the Isle of Man is home to a thriving population of red-necked wallabies. **ABOVE LEFT:** Gayle Fiddler takes a rubbing from the gravestone of Jim and Margaret Irving. **ABOVE RIGHT:** The island even has a reputedly haunted theatre in Peel.



ABOVE: The Drinking Dragon, a spectacular rock formation on the island's south west coast. BELOW: Gef enjoys a beautiful summer's day revisiting his old haunts.

a huge, fantastic simulacrum that the locals call 'the Drinking Dragon' – a massive rock formation that looks like a dragon, wings folded against its sides and dipping its head into the water to drink.

Ben and Gayle Fiddler had managed to find Jim and Margaret Irving's grave in a churchyard in Peel and took a rubbing from the stone.

Our camera traps showed crows and a hedgehog (far more common here than on the mainland). We also saw a polecat. Though not related to mongooses, they are superficially similar and were introduced to the island in the 1600s. The creature shot at Cashen's Gap after the Irvings left in 1939 and thought by some to be Gef is clearly a polecat from the contemporary photos.

On our last night, something very strange happened at Eary Cushlin. I was sharing a room with Jackie, whose bed was about 10 feet from mine and at a right angle to it. She was woken by a strange sound emanating from my bed – a "strange popping noise", as she described it, that sounded like a small animal jumping around on the bed. I was sound asleep, but seeming to react to whatever was jumping around, invisibly, on my bed. I would

moan and throw my arms out as the sound approached me and lift up my feet when the sound moved to the bottom of the bed. Jackie said she watched this for 20 minutes. I appeared to be flailing about and trying to avoid a small, invisible animal jumping around on my bed. Was Gef bounding all about me as I slept?

I can't help but think that the Manx Tourist Board are missing a trick with Gef, who seems to have been largely forgotten on the Isle of Man. The otherwise excellent Manx Museum in Douglas has no mention of him, although the girl in the shop agreed that he would make an excellent addition to the folklore display. And surely Gef would make a great mascot for the Tourist Board – imagine: cuddly Gef toys, Gef colouring books, a Gef trail that visitors could follow around the island... It's an open goal that nobody is shooting for.

Perhaps the new film *Nandor Fodor and The Talking Mongoose* will change all that. We can only hope so.

❖ **RICHARD FREEMAN** is a cryptozoologist, writer and the Zoological Director of the Centre for Fortean Zoology. He has been a regular contributor to *Fortean Times* for many years.



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WHY FORTEAN?



FORTEAN TIMES is a monthly magazine of news, reviews and research on strange phenomena and experiences, curiosities, prodigies and portents. It was founded by Bob Rickard in 1973 to continue the work of Charles Fort (1874–1932).

Born of Dutch stock in Albany, New York, Fort spent many years researching scientific literature in the New York Public Library and the British Museum Library. He marshalled his evidence and set forth his philosophy in *The Book of the Damned* (1919), *New Lands* (1923), *Lo!* (1931), and *Wild Talents* (1932).

He was sceptical of dogmatic scientific explanations, observing that some scientists tended to argue according to their personal beliefs rather than the rules of evidence and that inconvenient data were ignored, suppressed, discredited or explained away. He criticised modern science for its reductionism, its attempts to define, divide and separate. Fort's dictum "One measures a circle beginning anywhere" expresses instead his philosophy of Continuity in which everything is

in an intermediate and transient state between extremes.

He had ideas of the Universe-as-organism and the transient nature of all apparent phenomena, coined the term 'teleportation', and was perhaps the first to speculate that mysterious lights seen in the sky might be craft from outer space. However, he cut at the very roots of credulity: "I conceive of nothing, in religion, science or philosophy, that is more than the proper thing to wear, for a while."

Fort was by no means the first person to collect anomalies and oddities – such collections have abounded from Greece to China since ancient times. **Fortean Times** keeps alive this ancient task of dispassionate weird-watching, exploring the wild frontiers between the known and the unknown.

Besides being a journal of record, **FT** is also a forum for the discussion of observations and ideas, however absurd or unpopular, and maintains a position of benevolent scepticism towards both the orthodox and unorthodox. **FT** toes no party line.

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THE DEVIL IS ON HIS WAY TO DUMP A GREAT SPADEFUL OF ROCK AND EARTH ONTO BEWDLEY - THE LOVELY MARKET TOWN ON THE RIVER SEVERN...

HE MEETS A TRAVELLER...

WHERE D'YOU BE GOING, SIR?

THE BEWDLEY FOLK ARE INCORRUPTABLE!

THEY HAVE RESISTED ALL MY RECOMMENDATIONS TO VICE!

THEY ARE BEYOND DAMNATION!

THERE'S NOTHING FOR IT BUT THAT I SHOULD DUMP THIS HILL IN THE RIVER SEVERN, AND FLOOD THEM OUT!!

...puff... puff-puff...

THIS SHOVELFUL IS GETTING VERY HEAVY! HOW FAR IS IT TO BEWDLEY?

HOW FAR? WHY, SIR - I'VE COME FROM BEWDLEY, AND...

...I'VE WORN OUT ALL THESE SHOES ON THE ROAD SO FAR!

WHAT?

I CAN'T BE BOTHERED TO CARRY THIS HILL ALL THAT DISTANCE! I'LL JUST DUMP IT HERE...

AND SO IT IS TODAY - THE DEVIL'S SPITTLEFUL NATURE PARK!

AND THE TRAVELLER? HE PICKED UP HIS WARES AND WENT ABOUT HIS BUSINESS...

BEWDLEY TOWN IS ONE OF MY BEST CUSTOMERS! I'M NOT HAVING NO OLD DEVIL DROPPING A HILL ON TOP OF IT!

BOB THE BOOT COBBLER

BEWDLEY

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STRANGE DEATHS

UNUSUAL WAYS OF SHUFFLING OFF THIS MORTAL COIL

Australian authorities are investigating the deaths of Natasha Lechner and Jarrad Antonovitch in New South Wales, which both occurred after they had taken kambo (also known as sapo), a waxy substance obtained by scraping the skin of a live giant monkey frog, originally found in the Amazon. There, indigenous peoples have used kambo for centuries to improve hunting skills and ward off bad luck, but in the West, New Age practitioners promote it as being able to "detoxify" the body, increase mental clarity and cure a variety of illnesses. There is no medical evidence to back up their claims and the substance is illegal in many countries, including Australia. In a kambo ritual, users drink large quantities of water, then make burns on their skin, after which the substance is rubbed into the wound. The drug causes a dramatic increase in blood pressure and heart rate and induces extreme vomiting and defecating, with effects lasting around half an hour. Lechner, 39, had trained as a kambo practitioner and was using it for morbid obesity and back pain. On 8 March 2019, she applied kambo to five wounds on her chest and arms and minutes later passed out and began foaming at the mouth, dying shortly after from an "acute cardiac event". Antonovitch, 46, who was using kambo to help deal with a brain injury that left him partially disabled, did not die immediately after taking kambo but passed away several hours later from a ruptured oesophagus caused by the violent vomiting the drug had induced. Australia's Therapeutic Goods Administration have kambo listed in the highest possible danger classification for medicines and chemicals. "It's deemed to be of such great danger to human safety that you can't even use it in research," says Daniel Perkins, who heads a psychedelics research institute in Melbourne. *BBC News*, 10 May 2023.

Aisiah Sintia Dewi, 38, was on the way to meet her niece in Kualanamu Airport in Medan, Indonesia, but vanished after calling to say she was trapped in a lift. Her family contacted the airport and asked them to search for Dewi, but they said they could not find any trace of her. However, three days later, staff responding to reports of an evil stench in one of the airport lift shafts found Dewi's body at the bottom. Checking the airport CCTV, they saw her walking calmly into

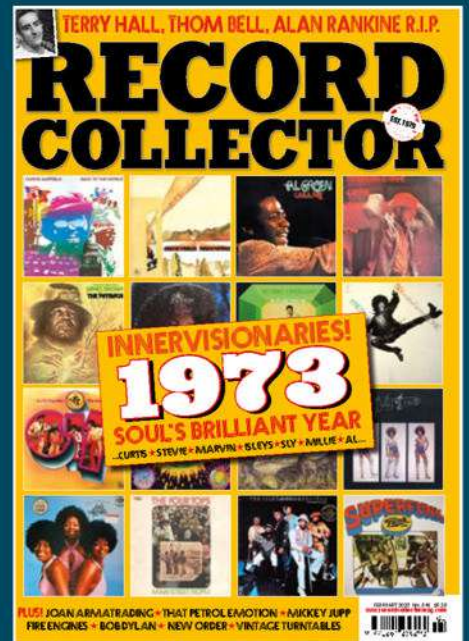
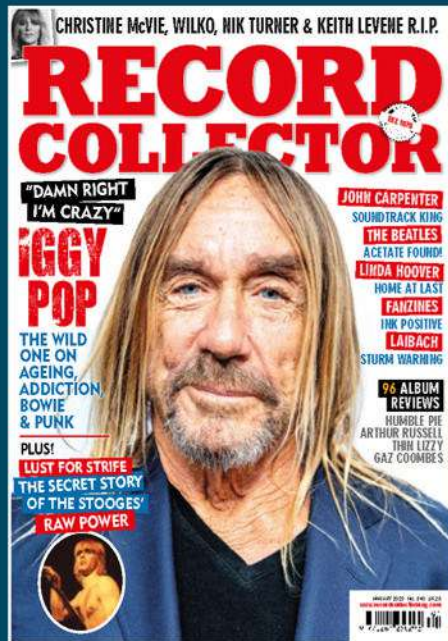
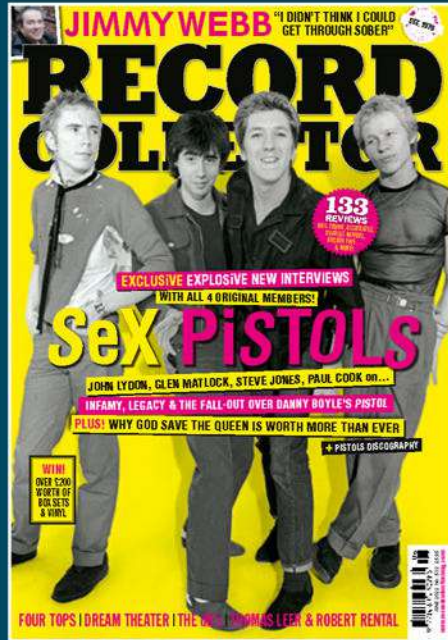


the lift to the second-floor check-in area looking at her phone. Once the lift reached the second floor though, she appeared confused, unaware that a second set of lift doors had opened behind her. Dewi can then be seen pushing the emergency button and attempting to force the closed lift doors, then making her phone call, still unaware that the open doors were behind her. Eventually, she manages to force the closed doors open and steps out of the lift, falling down the shaft to her death. *dailymail.co.uk*, 2 May 2023.

Several days after he was last seen alive, the body of Brandon Lee Buschman, 34, was discovered in a chest freezer in the basement of an unoccupied house in Babbitt, Minnesota. Buschman had active warrants out for his arrest and is believed to have hidden in the freezer after seeing police in the area. Being an older model, the freezer could not be unlatched from inside, so to turn it into a bolt hole Buschman had rigged up a mechanism with part of a lawn ornament that would allow him to flip the external latch while he was inside. Unfortunately, "The rod was jammed between the gasket and the manufactured edge, preventing the rod from being able to manipulate the latching mechanism from the inside," police said, so Buschman was trapped inside the freezer, where he died. Police were unsure how long he had been stuck inside the appliance. *mirror.co.uk*, 10 Jul 2023.

Police responding to reports of a burglary in progress at a Lowe's Home Improvement store in Waldorf, Maryland, at 12.40am found that Bryce Caleb Timothy Brown, 20, had broken into the store, stolen a forklift, and "rammed it through the rear gates". He had then driven the stolen forklift to the parking lot of a nearby branch of Home Depot and used it to ram a car in which Gloristine Pinkney, 73, was sleeping. When Brown started ramming her vehicle Pinkney jumped out and started to run away, but Brown "followed her, struck her with the forklift and ran over her", according to the sheriff's office. He then stole her car and used it to flee the scene. When the police arrived, they found Pinkney dead under the forklift. Police are mystified as to the motive for the attack as the suspect and the victim did not appear to know each other. *editionscnn.com*, 4 Jul 2023.

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